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ELIZABETH BISHOP PHOTOGRAPHIC POETICS

THE PERIPHERAL VISION

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Thesis

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Elizabeth Bishop's Photographic Poetics - The Peripheral Vision

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Elizabeth Bishop's poetics of description has been the object of numerous critical studies. These most often focus on questions of observation, positioning, framing, and refer to Bishop's aesthetics as "optical poetics." Instead of simply using optical vocabulary to talk about her work, I found that comparing her practice and the aesthetics of photography would help to illuminate our understanding of the restraint and yet strength of her work. This interdisciplinary approach allows me to answer very important questions: how does one make images with words? How does one palliate the inadequacies of the written word in the field of description? Bishop's descriptive powers question the limitations of the written word's ability to evoke and the boundary between reading and seeing. The advent of photography brought new challenges and pushed writers and poets to sharpen their creative tools. Bishop writes poems that are, at first sight, very simple in their language: they aim at being so close to reality that they might well be a replacement for that reality, or reality itself. Looking at photography and the motives for taking pictures allows a deeper understanding of the important role observation and powerful imagery play in Bishop's poetry.

As an art of careful observation, photography allows one to reveal the uncanny of everyday life, the familiar in the unfamiliar, because it can capture details that might have remained invisible had the camera not caught them. Primarily, Bishop's poetry is an art of precise observation that seeks out the strange dimension of the ordinary. Comparing both arts illuminates the way Bishop's precision works at revealing the oneiric in the empirical. Photographs are also a way to freeze and retain a moment, a piece of reality that can never be again. As such, photography is an art of nostalgia. Behind the compulsion to take pictures is a desire to control the chaos of life, to cope with grief, loss, and death. Bishop's poetry expresses nostalgia for places that cannot be anymore because they were places of the mind or places she can never return to. Her poems are an attempt to recreate and preserve a past of loss and grief through the taking of images that can encapsulate the pain, as well as shed light on the present.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 – Unfamiliar Familiarity .....	13
Light and Darkness: Hyper-Reality in Bishop’s Poetry.....	14
The Man-Moth’s Camera Obscura.....	20
Bishop’s Dreams of Reality.....	25
Chapter 2 - Loss in Translation: Poems of Subdued Grief.....	33
Taming Pain, Visualizing Loss.....	34
Filigree Poetry: Sestina’s Delicate Armor.....	42
Framing the Real.....	46
Chapter 3 - Wherever Home May Be.....	52
Bishop’s Hopeful Art of Failure.....	53
Questions of Travel.....	60
Bishop’s Proto-Dream-House.....	69
Conclusion.....	76
Annexes.....	84
Works Cited.....	9

## Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop writes poems with the crystal-clear clarity of dreams, as paradoxical as this sounds. With the sharpness of a camera, her images are carefully composed and intricate “wordscapes” of the most vivid quality; the poet Robert Lowell, who became one of her best friends through sustained correspondence, praised and envied her control and eye for detail. “Here, above, / cracks in the building are filled with battered moonlight. / The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat. / It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on, / and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.” This excerpt from “The Man-Moth” reflects Bishop’s almost obsessive hunger for a description that locates and frames as precisely as possible, a description that pushes the limits of the power of words to evoke, questioning the boundary between reading and seeing.

Reading about Bishop often feels like reading a photographic review. Her poetry is often analyzed in terms of observation (observer and observed), positioning, framing, and a lot has been written about her poetics of description and “optical poetics.” I will draw on this literary criticism to build my own comparative study between her poetry and photography. It is worth noting that Bishop was drawn to painting and did some herself. A collection of her paintings (mostly friends, loved ones, and familiar places) was put together in a book: *Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop Paintings*. Although one probably would not go as far as calling her a painter, she writes in a letter to Anne Stevenson (who wrote two critical studies of her work) that she often thinks she has missed her vocation. Wallace Stevens writes in a text concerning the imaginative

process and aesthetics "that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks in respect to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters" (Stevens, 160). The connection between poetry and painting, a connection underscored by the process of gazing, has been described many times in relation to Elizabeth Bishop's poems. Thomas J. Travisano has described her poem "Seascape" as a "cartoon version of the Raphael original" (Travisano, 120). Randall Jarrell wrote in *Third Book of Criticism* that Bishop's "minutely observant best poems [...] remind one of Vuillard or even, sometimes, of Vermeer [...] all exist on a small scale, and some of the later poems especially are too detailedly and objectively descriptive" (Jarrell, 325). However, partly in the way she uses tropes of light and darkness, stasis and movement, and in the way she is drawn to optical instruments and to a rather chemical, technical vocabulary, Bishop seems more akin to the photographer than to the painter.

In a letter addressed to Anne Stevenson in January 1964, Elizabeth Bishop wrote that "lack of observation seems to [her] one of the cardinal sins, responsible for so much cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners—and general unhappiness, too" (Bishop, 855-65). In this quote, Bishop gives the reader a glimpse of the importance that the role of observation plays in her poetry and in life in general. In the summer of 1943, she worked in an optical shop. The experience lasted only 5 days, but it left an impression on her, as she notes that she "could spend a lot of time [...] watching everything through magnificent optical instruments of every kind, including periscopes." After reading Bishop's poetry, one is not surprised to discover she was fascinated with optical

instruments; her poems overflow with images of eyes, water drops, droplets, miniatures, reflections, and glass:

The window this evening was covered with hundreds of long, shining drops of rain, laid on the glass which was covered with steam on the inside. I tried to look out, but could not. Instead, I realized I could look into the drops, like so many crystal balls. Each bore traces of a relative or friend, several weeping faces slid away from mine; water plants and fish floated within water drops; watery jewels, leaves and insects magnified, and strangest of all, horrible enough to make me step quickly away, was one large long drop containing a lonely magnificent human eye, wrapped in its own tear. “ (Bishop, diary entry)

With Bishop, reading and writing become optical processes to navigate between a reality that is extremely concrete and a slippage into what’s under the surface, into what cannot be seen. This infinite abyss is hinted at, brought to the surface but never fully revealed by her poetics of description. As I will show, she makes heavy use of photographic techniques that are brilliantly translated into the realm of the written word to create poems that try to palliate the possible inadequacies of language in the field of description or that maybe help take the written word to an ambitious level of “visuality,” of evocation.

What drives a comparison of Bishop’s poetics to photography and not to other visual arts is, first, the fact that a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality, as John Szarkowski points at in *The Photographer’s Eye*. Empirical experiences are the main material of Bishop’s poetry. In a way, her poems are life studies, a pure immersion in

the present tense. And the photograph, as Szarkowski puts it, “is a substitute for the object itself. It is simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible.” (Szarkowski, unpaginated). Bishop’s poetry seems to aim at being the real, not at describing it.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes explains that for him the essence of photography is the punctum, the poignant detail that wounds us and points to the loss of time. What does one do when looking at the photograph but look at and hold on to what the world cannot give any more? What is maybe even more important for us to look at, keeping in mind Bishop’s poetry, is photography’s relation to Time, and the photographic process itself. Szarkowski explains that each photograph is a time exposure: each of them describes a discrete parcel of time, and this time is always the present. Indeed, a photograph only describes that period of time in which it was made, and it alludes to the past and future only as they exist in the present. Bishop’s poetry is anchored in an eternal present, exploding moments that she stretches to observe under the lens of her image-craving eye. She is the exploring photographer and adult observer of the memories of her orphaned childhood. Finally, when the painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, the photographer deals with the entire world, selecting a picture from it. Indeed, a photograph is selected, not conceived, as Szarkowski reflects, and this will help illuminate Bishop’s sense of framing, organizing, and collecting the world (whether it is one she has imagined or one that is supposedly real).

I am interested here in looking at the parallels that exist between Bishop’s poetic aesthetics and photography’s aesthetics. I will be exploring how photography’s techniques and aesthetic moves inform Bishop’s poetry. However interesting it might be, I will not be looking at how Bishop’s work might have been influenced by



photography. In my analysis, I will focus on the creative path at the root of each art and on showing how photography illuminates the obsessive image-making of Bishop's poetry. Two specific movements in photography will draw my attention for the purposes of this comparison. The first movement I am interested in is photography's ability to reveal the unfamiliar in the familiar and destabilize regular perception. Secondly, I will be looking at photography as a way to make the past present while at the same time offering what Jack Kerouac called "a mournful vision of loss," making photography an art of nostalgia and melancholy.

In the beginnings, photography was expected to make photographed subjects beautiful, especially in the picturesque European tradition. Therefore, what was photographed were "important" subjects: the wilderness of Ansel Adams landscape photography for example, was nature idealized, idolized (see photo 1). Later on, especially in American photography, what became the subject of interest was ordinary reality and the idea that there is something ineffable about that reality that only the photographer can capture. Photographers such as Diane Arbus took pictures to reveal the *other* in the familiar, the world beneath the world. In the sixties and seventies, Arbus took pictures of the anonymous, ordinary people in a moment where their humanity was most vulnerable because exposed. As Susan Sontag notes in *On Photography*, "for Arbus, the camera photographs the unknown" (Sontag, 42). Arbus took pictures of people in an awkward position or with a strange grimace on their face, suggesting the presence of more than what's in front of the lens, but that one couldn't see if the lens hadn't been there (see photo 2). More extremely, she took pictures of people at the

margins of society: the marginals that made society queasy; transvestites, prostitutes, dwarves, etc. (see photo 3).

Bishop's profound engagement with reality also works paradoxically at suggesting what lies beyond the physical experience. She was drawn as well to marginal figures (the lone, grotesque animal, for example) and she looked to surrealism early on in her career. She was particularly interested in visual surrealism, notably the work of Klee and Ernst. Strong dream imagery and a propensity to modify shapes (magnifying and miniaturizing, among others) resulted from their influence. In this spirit, Bishop invests the territory of dreams as it seems to be a zone of in-between, a zone where concrete and abstract, reality and imagination meet in the strange formation of images that defy laws of perspective, scale, and time. In this sense, a lot of Bishop's poems redefine surrealism and its powers by establishing a bridge between imagination, dream and reality.

She doesn't use the bridge to cross from one field to another but rather to linger; a buffer zone from where the poet struggles and observes, from where shadows become tangible and memories are relived. As Bonnie Costello notes in *Questions of Mastery*, "Bishop's details are embedded in human perspective; they neither rise to the status of pure metaphor nor bare themselves as objective reality" (Costello, 24). In other words, Bishop uses dreams as a rhetorical device. They are images that allow her to illustrate a point and are not explored as a reality. In this sense, Bishop very much retains a control over her poetry that deeply contrasts with the artistic process of the "automatic writers" such as Andre Breton. These sought a non-mediated contact with reality through automatic writing, "an image of simultaneity" as Rosalind Krauss puts it in *The*

*Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Bishop's approach values observation and the preservation of a distance from what is beneath the surface. Her poems are, indeed, replete with reflected images, mirrors, glass, optical instruments that all either constrict the vision or enhance it. Either way, they are an intermediary that changes perception and allows the discovery of things one would not have seen otherwise. Her devotion to observation does, in a way, recall of László Moholy-Nagy, a Jewish-Hungarian painter and photographer of the mid twentieth century who also taught at the Bauhaus school. He believed that photography could create a whole new way of seeing the outside world that the human eye could not:

Camera-eyes see faster, sharper, at stranger angles, closer-to, microscopically, with a transposition of tonalities, with the penetration of X ray, and with access to the multiplication of images that make possible the writing of association and memory. Camera-seeing is thus an extraordinary extension of normal vision, one that supplements the deficiencies of the naked eye. (Krauss, 116)

The surrealists in the wake of Breton thought that automatic writing was the means to overcome the inadequacies of language to write the real, not about it. Automatic writing would let deep, unconscious and thus true thoughts be expressed. Bishop did not believe in automatic writing but rather found that in the creation of images with an eye sharper than usual and trained to the detail could open a door to the abstract world. Bishop's poetry is, in its magnificent vividness, a testimony of the presence of another world that I will analyze in the first chapter.

Hand-in-hand with the idea that photographs document the presence of a hidden reality is the idea that the world is not fully understandable. Photographers don't tell stories but collect and show images of this world that are, in their very nature, nostalgic and marked by loss. As Sontag notes, "photographers, operating within the terms of the Surrealist sensibility, suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it" (Sontag, 82). This artistic impulse, partially defined by the limitations of the image itself (which does not talk), is a form of surrender to the passing of Time, the admission of loss. Therefore, intrinsic to the photograph is the idea of trying to resolve grief and death. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes muses upon the death of his mother and the discovery of a very old photograph of her in her apartment after she died. In studying the image of his mother as a little girl, he marvels, "at last [I] rediscovered my mother" (Barthes, 69). What he sees in this photograph is not only his mother, but what made her his mother: her kindness. And it is in this "just image" (70), this accurate image, that he can find an answer to his grief, to some extent. The image is accurate because it is, as Barthes calls it, the truth of his mother, not just an image of her. Photographs are a direct link to the past. They are concrete presences of the past in the present, which makes them uniquely attuned to be the depositary of the grief the loss they represent provoked.

The hidden reality of Bishop's poetry is precisely the grief and loss that punctuated her whole life, and that she made the most accurate (and challenging, even provoking) pictures of in her collection of poems. She was orphaned really young and sort of lugged around from one grandparents' house to another. She lost a boyfriend to suicide after she refused to marry him in college, and later on lost the love of her life, Lota de

Macedo Soares, the friend and nurse of her sickness on one of her trips to Brazil, to an overdose. From so many tragedies, one would expect more cries, more volcanic intensity, more tears than her poems offer. But Bishop's is a quiet voice. It is raw and smoldering with pain and loss, but it never screams. She does not try to quiet down the feelings, but she keeps them behind a windowpane, behind the lens from which she observes them and takes precise, powerful and yet restrained pictures of them. The photograph is the best medium to talk about the past or try to make sense of it because it bears the seal of the past in its very making. Bishop thought that the only way of knowing the world, or at the very least to make sense of it somehow, was to divide it into small units. The second chapter of this thesis will focus on Bishop's mastery of framing and attempt to control this world of pain through the composition of images.

Always an uprooted child, Bishop never stopped traveling all her life. She lived in Brazil, traveled to Florida, Nova Scotia (her birthplace), New England. Her collections of poems bear geographical names or refer to travel or place: *North & South*, *A Cold Spring*, *Questions of Travel (Brazil and Elsewhere)*, *Geography III*. Bishop was fascinated with movement and stasis. For example, looking at poems such as "The Map," which explicitly refers to a flat and still document, Bishop restitutes the flux of connection the map brings about. She moves between reminiscences, imaginary places, creating a web between the map as it should be, the places it represents, what it reminds her of and the way such a representation works at inverting land and water. The speaker takes pleasure in reanimating the map: each stanza starts with a statement of its stillness: "Land lies in water; it is shadowed green" (stanza 1). "The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still" (stanza 2). "Mapped waters are more quiet

than the land is..." (stanza 3). The rest of each stanza, however, is replete with verbs of action such as "lean down," "lift," "stroke," "run out," " that create a rich image of movement.

In "The Imaginary Iceberg," the speaker once again thwarts expectations:

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,

Although it meant the end of travel.

Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock

and all the sea were moving marble.

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship;

we'd rather own this breathing plain of snow

though the ship's sails were laid upon the sea

as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.

O solemn, floating field,

are you aware an iceberg takes repose

with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?

[...]

Icebergs behoove the soul

(both being self-made from elements least visible)

to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

Interestingly enough, what is celebrated here is not the ship - synonym of adventure, travel and discovery- but the iceberg which blocks its route, even if temporarily. Bishop finds life in this monster of ice that most would relate to death and stillness, as her eye pierces its “soul” in a way, re-inventing its movement of air and water, inviting a pause in the travel. As massive as it is, the iceberg floats, it is on shifting ground. Our thoughts and the work of knowing are like the iceberg, in a way; they float on shifting grounds, particles of the flow of Time that one cannot stop. The “erected indivisibility” of the iceberg is celebrated and the soul invited to see, through its mass of immobility, the movement it is part of and how it contributes to it. Indeed, Bishop is interested in the paradox of movement and stasis and of the process of representing them. One will find “still explosions” (“The Shampoo”), “cloudy rocks” (“The Imaginary Iceberg”), or “league-boots of land that carry the city nowhere” (“From the Country to the City”) and many other images similarly paradoxical throughout her poems.

Bishop was a traveler whose travel writing is at once adventurous and passionate, reserved and reticent. Florida, Brazil, New England and Nova Scotia deeply marked her. I will not be giving an autobiographical reading of Bishop’s travel poetry; however, it is worth mentioning that she did not grow up with strong familial ties, with a place that she finds herself going back to: a home in the full sense of the term. A strong sense of loss and sometimes hushed despair pervades a lot of her lucid and sharp poems. Her heart and art are constantly on the road, navigating the reader on the railroads and

boats that took her everywhere but home. The first verse of her poem “Chemin de Fer” reveals this longing:

Alone on the railroad track

I walked with pounding heart.

The ties were too close together

or maybe too far apart.

There is a discrepancy, a lack that fuels all the poetry, and it is the acknowledgment of the failure of stability and the acknowledgment of living in liminal places forever; too close or too far from home, but never home. Bishop’s poetry is made of questions, not answers. In the third chapter, I will show how Bishop is using images (and their wholeness) to tell of the wonder of being in transit, of not belonging, of traveling and of the mutability of all things. Bishop seeks to unite this experience of instability in the image, using images as maps for travel, freedom of the soul and of the creative mind. Bishop’s art perceives the world in fragments because it is a way of preserving its integrity and collecting its presence. It is a way of creating the home that never was and never will be: a collection of poems one reads through as one would flip through a photo-album.



## Chapter One

### Unfamiliar Familiarity

In Rough Gems, his review of “Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box,” by Elizabeth Bishop, David Orr writes:

To begin, there is the peculiar Bishop voice, which is often called faux naif, but is probably closer to faux normal (the imitation isn't of innocence, but stability.) On one hand, she can seem perfectly straightforward - no poet, for instance, starts a poem more matter-of-factly: “In Worcester, Massachusetts, / I went with Aunt Consuelo / to keep her dentist's appointment.” [...] Yet no one else moves as easily or abruptly into the uncanniest registers of our literature: “The iceberg cuts its facet from within”; “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’”; “More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.” None of this is difficult, but it's astonishingly subtle and strange. The more one reads a Bishop poem, the greater the sense of huge forces being held barely but precisely in check - like currents pressing heavily on the glass walls of some delicate undersea installation. It doesn't seem as if the glass will break, but if it were to do so, we'd find ourselves engulfed by what Frost (her truest predecessor) called “black and utter chaos.”

The metaphor of the undersea installation can also be used to refer to Bishop's restrained collections of poems (*North & South*, *Geography III*) that are at once strong and fragile, tangible and fleeting, as it makes visible emotions and moments of abstraction that would have otherwise remained invisible, without letting them spill out on the page. Bishop is a careful tight-rope walker as she explores the liminal space between reality and dream, forever careful not to fall in absolutes of either kind. Looking at photography's techniques and more particularly the art of the black and white photograph can help understand Bishop's "faux normal." In this chapter, I want to focus on the straightforward uncanniness of her poetry which uses the concreteness of description to reveal the unfamiliar in the familiar.

## 1. Light and Darkness : Hyper-Reality in Bishop's Poetry

In the beginnings of photography, photos were only in black and white or shades of sepia. The aesthetics only involved the play with light and darkness, with shadows and spots of light. Indeed, because all colors disappear, the light factor is much emphasized and black and white photographs capture reality in a hyper-sensitive way. Without the distraction of color, other elements of photography stand out, elements that might have otherwise been overlooked. Consequently, the photographer must pay extra attention to lighting, textures and framing. There is a precision, an obvious care for details that emanate from a good black and white photograph. Such a photo is creating a mood that

can be much more powerful (and often more nostalgic, timeless)<sup>1</sup> than a color photograph. The black and white photographs, stripped of the reality of color, is an abstraction of our natural world. Almost hyper-real, they are at once incredibly vivid and mysterious, lending a sort of strangeness to the ordinary.

To illustrate this idea, let's take as an example a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz (see photo 4). In this photo taken at night in New York, all sources of light are extremely bright, which in turn emphasizes the darkness of the photo and the contours of the trees. The intensity of the photograph turns the wet street into an expanse of water that reflects the cityscape. The light of each lamppost is emphasized and beams so strongly that their contours are absorbed in the light, emphasizing the uncanny silhouettes of the trees whose almost frightening bare branches look like as many long fingers.

Bishop's poetics of description relies in great part on questions of light and darkness, absorption and immersion, that are of particular interest in understanding how her descriptions are so vivid and so mysterious at once. In a poem such as "At the Fishhouses," the writing slowly acquires the texture of a complex black and white photograph as Bishop composes the scene of this "cold evening, / down by one of the fishhouses." This poem emerges from the recesses of language, the same way a photograph emerges on the paper in the developer<sup>2</sup> after having been exposed to the light of the enlarger; at first, almost invisible, later "cold dark deep and absolutely clear." Such an image is called a latent image, the invisible image produced by the exposure of

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop's poems are very often tinged with the hue of nostalgia. This, combined with her aesthetics of description and her interest in creating images from memories often leads the reader to instinctively picture her landscapes in black and white.

<sup>2</sup> Photographic developer is the common name given to the chemical mixture used to make the latent image visible.

the paper or film to light. Bishop's poetics of description use a similar technique as she focuses on the play "between the described landscape and the implied landscape, the physically manifest and the emotionally latent." (Lombardi, 45)

First of all, the language of the poem is almost metallic, as Bishop's main lexical field for the description creates an atmosphere of multiple shades of gray and silver:

his net, in the gloaming almost invisible, a dark purple-brown, [...]

All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,

swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,

is opaque, but the silver of the benches,

[...] is of an apparent translucence...

The flies are iridescent, the handles of the capstan are bleached, the knife black and old. The whole scene is "cold dark deep and absolutely clear," and the poem, in its clear, gray iciness moves like the mysterious sea "flowing and flown." There are touches of color such as the emerald moss on the buildings and the rusted ironwork. And yet, even as the speaker compares the rust to red blood stains, the stains are dried, thus black. It seems all colors in the poem are reflected, dark and absorbed in the general silvery light which seems at one and the same time to illuminate and conceal the scene. There is something incredibly sharp about Bishop's descriptions, as she doesn't resort to metaphors to compose the scene. She uses simple, clear, precise language ("black", "iridescent", etc.) to choose what remains sharp and in focus. The precision of her poetry is akin to the precision and optics of photography, and more practically to the

language of depth of field. In “The Fish,” the description of the animal’s eyes is even technical, scientific, clearly drawing on optical vocabulary: “I looked into his eyes / which were far larger than mine / but shallower, and yellowed, / the irises backed and packed / with tarnish tinfoil / seen through the lenses / of old scratched isinglass.” And yet, this passage is also an interesting moment in Bishop’s art where exact description passes into metaphor while still remaining in the realm of concrete presence.

In “Going to the Bakery,” tropes of light and darkness are also used to conceal or reveal parts of the scene described. What is interesting in this poem is that the main character from whose vantage point the scene is seen is a source of light itself: the moon. The moon illuminates what she looks at, and it is revealed, so to speak, under her magnetic, electric gaze:

Instead of gazing at the sea

the way she does on other nights,

the moon looks down the Avenida

Copacabana at the sights,

new to her but ordinary.

She leans on the slack trolley wires.

Below, the tracks slither between

lines of head-to-tail parked cars.

(The tin hides have the iridescence

of dying, flaccid toy balloons.)

The tracks end in a puddle of mercury;

the wires, at the moon's

magnetic instances, take off

to snarl in distant nebulae.

The bakery lights are dim. Beneath

our rationed electricity,

the round cakes look about to faint -

each turns up a glazed white eye.

Once again, the poem comes to life in an almost scientific way, in the light of silver, white, metallic moonlight. The eye, white in the dim light, the iridescence of the puddle of mercury, are tropes of Bishop's scientific, almost chemical skills for description. The poem takes on the texture of a black and white photograph as words become the lens of the enlarger,<sup>3</sup> letting filter the dim light of a nostalgic avenue in Rio:

In front of my apartment house

a black man sits in a black shade,

lifting his shirt to show a bandage

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<sup>3</sup> In photography, the enlarger is a projector composed of a light source, a holder to hold the photographic negative in place, and a lens. The light goes through the negative (previously exposed to light in the camera and then developed). The enlarger is used in the darkroom to make photographic prints.

on his black, invisible side.

In *Word Sightings*, Sarah Riggs notes about Bishop's poem "Seascape" that "by manipulating and overlapping two-dimensional surfaces into an illusion of depth and visibility, Bishop creates the illusion of a veritable and material 'See-scape.' Her verbal effects are at once extra-visual and unretreatingly optical..." (Riggs, 42). Words in Bishop's poetry are like viewing optics, creating the illusion of depth and visibility in an active effort to mimic reality. A poem like "Florida" also explores this idea of two dimensions overlapping: the postcard of the state and the state itself. The first part of the poem is about Florida during the day, but in the second part Bishop directs her unforgiving gaze on Florida at night and turns it into a grainy black and white photograph:

After dark, the fireflies map the heavens of the marsh

until the moon rises.

Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,

and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks

too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest

postcard of itself.

Florida is seen through a partial light, "the coarse-meshed" light of the moon. Again, color is gone into "black specks" which accentuates the vividness of the scene: it is

Florida as it is literally seen at night by the human eye. As Riggs notes, through this super-mimesis effect “the copy of reality is given an enhanced reality effect.”<sup>4</sup> (Riggs, 43). By using tropes of light and darkness in the same way photography does, Bishop transforms the exercise of description into a work of translation between the two arts: words are lenses to observe the real and capture what they see, in much the same way a camera works.

## 2. The Man-Moth’s Camera Obscura

In other words, Bishop’s poetics of description seems to push words beyond their verbal limits, using photographic techniques to make the seeing eye and the reading eye intersect. Riggs comments that “Bishop invokes the trope of black and white, sun and dark, [...] because it marks the impossible convergence of seeing and reading, page and image” (Riggs, 48). “The Man-Moth” is a particularly interesting poem to explore in this light, as it can be read as an allegory for taking a picture and carefully developing it. Indeed, as I will explore later, Bishop’s craft is careful, demanding and extremely precise in its attention to detail. “The Man-Moth” is a night poem that was born of a visual slippage: a typo in a newspaper article (it should have read “mammoth” but got written “man-moth”). Already in the title we can see how Bishop draws attention

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<sup>4</sup> “Reality effect” is an expression from Roland Barthes’s literary criticism. Barthes argues that authors include incidental details – details that don’t add to plot, character development, or atmosphere – which indicate the reality of the story in which they are deployed. Although I am using the same term here, it is not to be confused with Barthes’s expression.



to the intersecting of reading and seeing, as she turns a typo into a creature of the night  
that desperately tries to reach the moon:

Here, above,  
  
cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.  
  
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.  
  
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,  
  
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.  
  
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,  
  
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,  
  
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth  
  
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,  
  
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges  
  
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks  
  
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.  
  
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,  
  
proving the sky quite useless for protection.  
  
He trembles, but he must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the facades,  
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,  
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage  
to push his small head through that round clean opening  
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.

The reader is taken through the vertical lines of this nocturnal cityscape, up the facades and to the sky, down the buildings all the way into the depth of the city's tunnels. The moon against the black sky is the only source of light and at the center of Man's and the Man-Moth's attention. There is something beyond the flatness of the moon, beyond this image that is endowed with artistic powers that the Man-Moth seeks to reach. He sees the moon as hole through which he might climb in order to turn into a kind of painting or maybe a writing: the black scrolls on the light. The precise concreteness of what is seen in the poem and the play with contrasts suggests a depth to the surface, a place beyond the sky, a depth to the concrete that Bishop's sense of perspective emphasizes. It is a place where the moon becomes a hole in the sky, the sidewalks hide the subways and tunnels, and the dark home (darkroom?) of the Man-Moth. The second part of the poem almost reads like an inverted image of the beginning scene, like an image in a camera:

If you catch him,  
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,  
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens

as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids

one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.

Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention

he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,

cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

It seems that the moon-in-the-dark-sky becomes the tear-in-the-dark-pupil as the story-poem unfolds. However, maybe more interestingly, the bright moon becomes the dark pupil of the Man-Moth, as in the process of turning a negative into a positive by exposing the negative to light. From his experience climbing to the moon, the Man-Moth takes a photograph. His eye, this dark pupil, this darkroom, then produces the tear, the image, the poem that is offered to the most observant of us. The Man-Moth is photographer and camera at once. He is the one who sees more in the moon than a cold planet refracting light from the sun and he is also the one who can process it. He is the artist who sees beyond the ordinary and can reveal it, the one who challenges the apparent flatness of the moon and seeks its depth, unlike man who does not see the magical in the concrete of these empirical details he superficially notices. At once photographer and camera, the Man-Moth's art is painful to produce and worthy only of the most observant. In this poem, Bishop masters the feat of creating an imaginary place that feels like a real one, using such photographic tools as depth of field to suggest that the whole scene is made of layers that shelter the tear of the Man-Moth, the final image. This strange place, itself stemming from a visual slippage, a

misspelling, is carefully constructed so as to stage a meditation on art that is as spectacular as it is precise with the clarity of mystery.

In “The Man-Moth”, Bishop manages to make an imaginative place as visually present as a real one which allows her to stage a struggle of complicated concepts. She creates a world from scratch, and yet, as Zachariah Pickard notes in *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description*, “the brilliant intersecting of frame and arrangement makes this imaginary world intensely real” (Pickard, 21). This poem’s “intense imagery brings objects to a perfection of unfamiliar familiarity, fixing them firmly in the reader’s mind” (Pickard, 29). To understand how this poem works, it is helpful to look at Otto Umbehr’s photograph *Mystery of the Street* (see photo 5). Otto Umbehr was a German photographer working in the aftermath of World War I, taking advantage of the developing of such techniques as double exposure, photo-montage, negative printing, etc. His photographs invite strange perspectives that show that photography can do more than merely represent what is before the lens; it can also bring forth and make accessible the strangeness of everyday life. This photo, which is a simple inversion of his overview of the street, posits an unsettling world in which the familiar has become enigmatic and mysterious, and shadows seem more real than substance. This photo reflects the power of observation to reveal original perspectives and the almost magical quality of the world as seen through the lens of the camera.

In a similar way, Bishop makes for the reader a rather surrealist world that feels uncannily real. Shadows play an essential compositional role in her poem as well: the shadow of Man “only as big as his hat” and the shadow of the Man-Moth, “dragging like a photographer’s cloth behind him.” Two perspectives are at odds in this poem; that of

Man, numb, mechanical, dehumanized, and that of the Man-Moth, a strange creature overflowing with human emotions. If we conceive of these two characters as lines, then we can see that they are opposite and might never really intersect. The Man-Moth comes out when man goes home, at night. Man's shadow is at his feet, whereas the Man-Moth's drags behind him up the facades. The line the Man-Moth follows is vertical, going up the buildings, falling and then burying himself underground. Man's is horizontal, almost static. Man conceives of the moon the way a scientist would -in terms of temperature, physical proprieties- but he doesn't see beyond that. In fact, Man doesn't even look at the moon; he is content with the abstract concept of it. It is a limited view, whereas there is ambition and longing for something other on the Man-Moth's part. Their lives intersect in the train going fast underground where it is Man's job to go beyond his horizon of empirical facts and deepen his sense of observation so as to grow, gain deeper understanding of the world around him, experience what the Man-Moth experiences. Precisely, the camera is the ultimate tool for observation because it can capture moments in time too fast for the human eye, too remote, too small. It can freeze time so as to let us see what might otherwise have remained invisible. Bishop uses spatial markers and optical techniques to visually create a more abstract struggle.

What is the Man-Moth? What does he represent? In *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, Bonnie Costello tends to see the poem as a sort of struggle between inner, unconscious life and outer life. Man is estranged from his inner life, struck paralyzed in his tiny shadow, whereas the Man-Moth represents a more nuanced character who cannot "hoard his emotion any more than he can transcend his physical world" (Costello, 54). To this, I will add that "The Man-Moth" is a poem that greatly nuances a

position that would see Bishop as strictly interested in the empirical experience. The question of observation is one that pervades the text as Man is criticized for being too narrow-minded and urged to pay attention to the Man-Moth's tear. Again, sight (the visual experience) and insight (the inner experience of thoughts) are connected in Bishop's poetics. A poem like "The Man-Moth" that has a dream-like, surreal quality provides an important insight into Bishop's complicated investment in surrealism.

### 3. Bishop's Dreams of Reality

A lot of Bishop's poems have the feel of a surrealist nightmare, as "The Man-Moth," "Paris, 7 a.m." or "Insomnia" show. In "Paris, 7 a.m.," Bishop embarks the reader on a dreamy journey through Time and the time of memories in the composition of striking yet simple images. "Paris, 7.a.m." is a poem in which reason and logic are consistently challenged in incongruously impeccable stanzas. Disoriented and troubled, the reader cannot fix on a subject and is instead taken into a stream of connected images. In this poem, she explores what can be seen and experienced in liminal states between sleeping and waking, past memories and present. If French surrealism and Bishop's surrealism meet in practice -in the habit of collage, bringing together unexpected elements -their core motive for doing so is different, if not contrary. Bishop's poetry is a poetry of connection whereas, fundamentally, surrealism claims to be juxtaposing the unrelated in the unexpected. The other fundamental difference is that the surrealist is a loud and authoritative movement. Bishop's voice is strong but it has the humility of

tentativeness. She seeks out the moments when we connect to something deeper and larger at the edge of our every day life, but she has the wisdom to know that they are rare moments and to accept that often we won't see them. Where the surrealists overthrow, explode and transform, Bishop questions, fissures and disturbs. A poem like "Paris, 7.a.m." is defamiliarizing, not surrealist.

I make a trip to each clock in the apartment;

some hands point histrionically one way

and some point others, from the ignorant faces.

Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge

so much that days are journeys round the suburbs,

circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles.

The short, half-tone scale of winter weathers

is a spread pigeon's wing.

Winter lives under a pigeon's wing, a dead wing with damp feathers.

In her repetitive language, Bishop weaves a web of overlapping images, overlapping sentences, that surround the reader like a light fog that blurs contours and opens doors to the oneiric, turning memories into dreams and dreams into memories. Her dreams are quiet, moving with the simple clarity of her language that remains powerfully concrete even as it creates imaginary places and images. There are commas and periods in her dreams, places to rest and observe her ideas turn into images. Surrealist

poetry has the violence of an outburst. To visualize the differences between surrealist poetry and Bishop's soft but firm destabilization, let us take a look at "Postman Cheval," a poem by surrealist poet Andre Breton:

We are the birds always charmed by you from the top of these belvederes

And that each night form a blossoming branch between your shoulders

[and the arms of your well beloved wheelbarrow

Which we tear out swifter than sparks at your wrist

We are the sighs of the glass statue that raises itself on its elbow when

[man sleeps

And shining holes appear in his bed

Holes through which stags with coral antlers can be seen in a glade

And naked women at the bottom of a mine

You remembered then you got up you got out of the train

Without glancing at the locomotive attacked by immense barometric roots

Complaining about its murdered boilers in the virgin forest

In the beginning of this poem, the reader is taken into the stream of consciousness without introduction. Surrealist poetry is about sweeping the reader away to a land of confusing depth through a random journey of images that defy the laws of logic. There is no punctuation, nowhere to pause, and each word seems loaded with the weight of



an unconscious meaning. The writing jumps in all directions and is everywhere at once. When reading a poem by Breton, one often feels like one is racing through the poet's mind. For surrealists, writing a poem is about the spark, the trigger and the race to the end of the thought. For Bishop, what is important is where the gaze goes, not where it comes from:

Look down into the courtyard. [...]

It is like introspection

to star inside, or retrospection,

a star inside a rectangle, a recollection;

this hollow square could easily have been there.

She is interested in perspective, ways of looking. That's why her poetics involve labor, careful construction and slow movement. The Man-Moth laboriously climbs the facades of the buildings; he tries, he fails and tries again. There is a sense of victory in surrealist poems that is totally absent from Bishop's poetry. "You" in Breton's poem goes "without glancing," whereas the reader of Bishop's poems is held to standards of observation: only if one pays attention can one catch the tear of the Man-Moth. The reader does not get lost in an overload of nonsensical (or dream-like) images but rather is put on a path and carefully guided through a specific vision. Bishop's vocabulary is invariably simple and even technical, because what is important for Bishop is the process of forming the image as closely to reality as possible. In surrealist poetry, words are heavier because they are supposedly coming from the depth of the unconscious.

As Pickard points out, surrealism seems to clash with Bishop's poetics of description as she refuses to adhere to the idea of uncontrolled writing and of absence of logical control. In a letter dubbed "The Darwin Letter" that she wrote to Anne Stevenson, she says:

Dreams, works of art (some), glimpses of the always more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational—and I do admire Darwin! But reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.

Umbehrr's photograph is a perfect example of that peripheral vision, of what a keen sense of observation mingled with a little chance and a mastery of photography's techniques can produce. "The Man-Moth" is equally a product of Bishop's mastery of descriptive techniques and her understanding of their power. Indeed, contrary to surrealist ideas, "Bishop doesn't abandon the stage," as Pickard puts it. "She searches and interrogates the strange," draws lessons from it, and rejects the denial of artistic agency. She translates Darwin's scientific method into a poetic one, and transforms the observer into an active examiner rather than the mere transcriber surrealist artists were becoming through the technique of automatic writing. Rather, Bishop "attempts to redeem the oneiric and uncanny from the surrealist's taint" (Pickard, 49). In short,

instead of trying to force the unconscious “out” of its hiding place, she waits for it to come to her through her “heroic observations” and doesn’t seem to care how this whole process comes into place. This method or (rather lack thereof) used to woo the uncanny of everyday life out of its shadows is closely linked to the process of taking a photo. Indeed, there is almost an equally important amount of chance and observation that comes into the making of a photograph. Meaning, therefore, seems to be always at the margins of the text, beneath the surface, as the description forms a safe and protective screen around it.

In “The Man-Moth,” man is only capable of ordinary perception. Staring at his feet, he is turned into a shadow “only as big as his hat.” Man “doesn’t see the moon; he observes only her vast properties, /...the queer light ... neither warm nor cold...” The Man-Moth, on the contrary, longs for more, for an existence beyond the sky, for this unreachable unconscious. It is an illusion, as Costello points out, but he nonetheless is a more hopeful figure. Indeed, he seems to represent the artist who sees the moon as more than what it is: “He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky.” And yet, he fails in his attempt to “push his small head through the round clean opening.” The unconscious can only remain inaccessible in Bishop’s poetry; it can be sought after but only lured into getting closer through the powers of observation and keen description. The poet has the ability to see the moon for more than what it is, just as the photographer has an eye to detect the magical and uncanny that inhabit the world underneath the surface. Poet and photographer can reveal these presences only by being able to observe the evidence of the abstract world that are left in the concrete world. Bishop’s poems are searching for something that is not immediately visible,

which was in many ways what Diane Arbus, an American photographer in the middle of the twentieth century, was doing in her provoking photographs of dwarves, “freaks,” and transvestites.

Arbus also had an eye for capturing the moment when ordinary people’s normality appeared ugly or surreal, when grief and desolation would suddenly, surreptitiously creep out to the surface. Arbus’s photos often disturbed because she was after this moment in a person’s face and body that detaches from reality, in a way, the moment when something other is revealed: an unfamiliar familiarity, another world. In 1962, she photographed a little boy playing with a toy grenade in Central Park in New York City. She took several photos, but this is the one that she chose to print (see photo 6). In this particular photo, the little boy’s posture is almost maniacal. His suspender is fallen off his shoulder, his right hand is clutching the grenade and his left hand is contorted in the same gesture, except he’s not holding a grenade. His face twisted in a grimace and his long, stick-like limbs accentuate the strangeness of the photograph. It is a child playing with a toy grenade and at the same time it is something else, disturbing, unfamiliar, that is questioning what is happening: the fact that a child is playing with a grenade. Of the series of pictures she took of this little boy (see photo 4), most breathe youth and laughter and are perfectly “normal.” Arbus chose the one picture that seems to show something dark, uneasy, a grotesque grief that is all the more disturbing in that it is triggered by a child and that it feels familiar but isn’t anymore. There is death lurking in this photograph even though it is confused and indirect. It resides in the detail of the contorted hand, the grenade, the grimace. In the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet’s words: “Nothing is more fantastic than precision.” The detail and the ability to see this detail

are what bring forth a surreal, uncanny dimension. There is an uncompromising sense of honesty about her photographs, a sense that perspectives are multiple and that the visual experience enhanced by the camera reveals the uncanny beneath the real. Many of Bishop's poems function in the same way, her acute sense of observation and description creating a sense of nostalgia, grief, and loss that go beyond simple facts and objects.

If Bishop seems to have a love-hate relationship with surrealism, it is in great part because she does not surrender the stage to an uncontrolled stream of consciousness. As I mentioned, her dreams are carefully composed. Bonnie Costello has written at length about Bishop's struggle for mastery of what she sees and internalizes in her poetry, for a moment of temporary knowledge that is at once frustrating and all that there is to have. The Man-Moth is a sad and grotesque, almost Arbus-like character, the freak whose ability to see and want more is painful because he cannot have it. He can only write about the lack and the fierce, desperate hope to defy all and continue the experience. Indeed, there are two movements in Bishop's poetry: a faculty for finding the unfamiliar in the ordinary, for seeking and unveiling the shifting grounds of every day life, and at the same time, a desire to "steal" or rather create images from the world, to control this reality that is for her a reality of loss and grief.

## Chapter Two

### Loss in Translation: Poems of Subdued Grief

Bishop lost her father when she was four, and her mother disappeared in an insane asylum when she was five and they never saw each other again. She spent a rather lonely childhood between her maternal grandparents on a farm in Nova Scotia, and her paternal grandparents in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she was taken later and became very unhappy. Without entering the realm of autobiographical criticism, these facts are important to note since the dislocation of childhood is a fundamental theme in her poetry. It is the core of the human grief and need that fuel most of her poems and that merge with the landscapes of her childhood and travels. As I will show, her entire oeuvre is a way of artistically owning loss, grief and exile, of creating an image of them that one can hold onto concretely. Bishop creates images of what she never had while, in the same lucid movement, resigning herself to their irrevocable absence. Her dedication to observation has at least two different, if not opposite, purposes: seeking the instability of the real, this moment of slippage that makes the ordinary so mysterious, and keeping pain in check, stabilizing the fissure of dislocation and exile. In this chapter, I will be looking at these objects and places into which grief settles and hides. To understand the creative process of these images, I will look at the more sober realism of photography; not, as in chapter one, its quasi-surrealist capacity to bring out the strange in the everyday. Three poems about the difficulty of childhood dislocation

and loss will be in focus: “Death in Nova Scotia,” in which Bishop recounts a child’s first experience with death from a child’s point of view, “Sestina,” a poem about home and its secret dramas, and finally, “In the Waiting Room,” which stages little Elizabeth’s existential crisis in the waiting room at the dentist’s office.

## 1. Taming Pain, Visualizing Loss

As a deep sense of loss pervades most of Bishop’s poems, at the core of her poetics of description is a desire to preserve, to connect with the past that can shed light on the present. One of the main motives for taking the kind of photographs I will be talking about in this chapter is a need to remember loved ones, places visited and lived. Susan Sontag notes:

photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power. [...] When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures. [...] Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. [...] To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt. (Sontag, 8-15).

The first thing to note is that there is an aggression inherent to every photograph in the very act of taking it, as it is a way of turning people, places and feelings into objects that can be possessed. Bishop turns into a poetic art the ability to make an image of grief. It

is “a tool of power” in Bishop’s poetic process because it is how she controls the fundamental instability of the world around her, how she copes with loss and grief. Costello has dwelled at length on Bishop’s mastery of the art of making images, therefore I won’t be focusing on this but rather on the fact that this control allows the creation of poems that are strongholds for subtle and powerful grief. Secondly, Bishop’s poems speak of a time that is gone, testifying to its “relentless melt” without claiming that it can be regained and without trying to re-invent it. In this sense, it is there, participating in the mutability of all things, contributing to it without trying to transcend it. Bishop’s aesthetics are definitely detached from the Romantics, who sought the past in order to idealize it in their poems, the perfect place to go back to, the landscape of their childhood turning into a sort of earthly paradise. For example, in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” Wordsworth re-imagines the nature of his childhood:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream. (Wordsworth)

To this idealized landscape, Bishop offers a simple -and yet no less powerful- picture in “In the Waiting Room”:

The War was on. Outside,



in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.

This image is unadorned, and violent in its simplicity, in its simple presence of what *was*, and not of what it *could be*, transformed by the romantic ideals.

The photograph is a way of preserving and keeping alive a memory, and as such it bears with it the seal of the past, of loss. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes muses upon the experience of being photographed:

I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object:  
I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (if only for commercial reasons) this death in which his gesture will embalm me. [...]  
Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the “intention” to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the *eidos* of the Photograph. (Barthes, 14-15).

In other words, the photograph is an emanation of the past. One looks at it for what the world cannot give anymore: a deceased loved one, a place visited, a moment between friends and family, etc. And yet, “the photograph carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures at one glance. The photographic image is not only a trophy of this reality, but a document of its unity as that-which-was-present-at-

one-time” (Krauss, 107). Indeed, each photograph is a time exposure, in the same way that each of Bishop’s poems are thin slices of a past made of memories whose image she reconstructs, establishing a firm connection with the present. In *The Photographer’s Eye*, John Szarkowski explains that “immobilizing these thin slices of time [...] had to do [...] with seeing the momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed within the flux of movement” (Szarkowski, introduction). Bishop’s images of memories illuminate the past and the present as they reveal moments of struggle or apparently trivial scenes that turn out to offer, in the form of a kind of photo album of poems, a place to ground the self in time and space.

Bishop’s poems are reflections on the past, but she uses the blunt force of the photographic image to get to these often difficult memories. Her poems are equally unforgiving in that, as I explained earlier, they don’t attempt to idealize the past. Her poems reinvest specific, precise moments of incomprehension and struggle in their quiet and yet powerful presence. In *Necessary Angel*, Wallace Stevens makes a comment that is particularly relevant to Bishop’s aesthetics: “The subject matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so *reality is not that external scene, but the life that is lived in it.*<sup>5</sup>” (Stevens, 160) Indeed, it is not just description and details that create what Stevens calls a sense of "aesthetic integration as reality" (Stevens, 159). In Bishop’s poetry, it is the life of the memory -the emotions and the questioning that made the moment- that make it a slice of reality to be observed under the lens of her powerful eye.

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<sup>5</sup> My emphasis

Lucid, often darkly humorous, her “camera-pen” is implacably turned towards her past, capturing vivid moments in her travels, childhood, meditations. Each image that Bishop chooses is picked out of the rush of her memories. Frozen moment of eternal present, it shields and filters emotions and abstractions all at once. In “First Death in Nova Scotia,” Bishop offers an uncanny representation of death in the first person of a child attending a wake. Rather than being an abstract commentary on death in general and the meaning of the child’s experience, Bishop’s poem delves even more deeply into the child’s sensorial experience when confronted with death. Red and white are the two colors that pervade the poem, as the child is fascinated with the red eyes of the loon, the white fur and the translucent and cold skin of the deceased child. The child’s perspective is indeed much different from an adult’s. The child dwells between reality and fiction, crossing those frames fluidly as if they weren’t there.

In the cold, cold parlor  
  
my mother laid out Arthur  
  
beneath the chromographs:  
  
Edward, Prince of Wales,  
  
with Princess Alexandra,  
  
and King George with Queen Mary.  
  
Below them on the table  
  
stood a stuffed loon

shot and stuffed by Uncle

Arthur, Arthur's father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired

a bullet into him,

he hadn't said a word.

He kept his own counsel

on his white, frozen lake,

the marble topped table.

The child is talking about the stuffed loon in an almost playful manner that could be mistaken for irony but that the whole poem shows to be confusion and questioning. The child establishes connections between the everyday objects that surround the coffin: the chromographs of the members of the royal family, the stuffed loon killed by the Uncle and Arthur's dead body. Crossing frames of reality and imagination back and forth enables these connections and the creation of an image of death as the child saw it: a space between reality and dream. It also enables this story that the child tells to try to make sense of death:

The gracious royal couples

were warm in red and ermine,

their feet were well wrapped up

in the ladies' ermine trains.

They invited Arthur to be

the smallest page at court.

But how could Arthur go,

clutching his tiny lily,

with his eyes shut up so tight

and the roads deep in snow?

Not only is this poem restituting a moment of intense questioning about the meaning of (premature) death in the life of her child-self, it is also a poignant complaint about what happens after death, about the inability for words to really talk about something that isn't concrete. How and where can Arthur go when he can't see anything and when the weather doesn't permit travel? Bishop hasn't replaced the ineffability of death by an abstract musing. She uses verbs of action - "go," "invited," "fired," etc.- and never uses abstract concepts. She shields death with more concrete images that convey more intensity and more emotion than abstract thoughts could ever foster, as they disconnect the eye and the "I" from reality while throwing the reader deep into the experience of death. The signs and symbols of immortality beckon: the heavenly royal images await Cousin Arthur's entrance into a new, more glorious life, but even at her age the little girl is aware of problems. The dead boy, like the stuffed loon, seems really dead. Maybe the dead don't go anywhere. Maybe the dead are just dead and we are just trying to make ourselves comfortable by trying to domesticate death and the pain it brings with it.

And this is where the image-making in this poem makes the reader see more than is comfortable to see. Re-creating the image of her child-self's thought process (her visual inventory) during this disturbing experience lets the reader see a well of questioning about the nature of death, afterlife and the way one deals with death, at once trying to face it and disguise it. These questions ripple to the surface without ever being directly said. Each of these images is in part traumatic, the way a photograph can be because of the buried memories it can bring to the surface of our unconscious but also because it touches the real nature of the rituals that surround death: the fear they stem from. Bishop softly but surely forces the reader in a mode where drama has no place, controlling their emotions by directing the gaze to the loon for example. The loon gives the child something to focus on, something to think about that feels less painful than thinking about Arthur. At the same time, it gives her direct access to Arthur's death. The loon with his "deep and white breast" and "red glass eyes" is less threatening than the body in the coffin. But the loon and the imaginary story it suggests to the child is also a place where the child goes to avoid the other imaginary story the adults tell themselves: putting a lilly in the dead boy's hand, saying goodbye as if communication were still possible. The poem is putting in parallel two different images of death, that of the adult's and that of the child's who doesn't seem to buy into the adult's version.

Indeed, many images in this poem are doing the opposite of the images analyzed in the first chapter. Here, it is about taming the unfamiliar, domesticating death. The coffin becomes a "little frosted cake," something one could see at ordinary family gatherings. And yet, the attempt to frame and comprehend this death is rather unsuccessful. Bishop's gaze does not explain or accommodate this death. Rather, it reveals an

uneasiness, showing the process of those rituals trying to condense intense feelings of loss, to tame them into cohabiting within the domestic scene, the public funeral. The child's grief is displaced here because it sees the opacity of what is happening, the failure of language to resolve the problem, and she refuses the adult's explanations and disguises. The poem-memory stages the inner struggle Bishop experienced without ever explaining it: there is no epiphany in Bishop's poetry. In other words, she is more interested in the process of the mind at work than she is in bringing its struggle to a resolution.

## 2. Filigree Poetry: Sestina's Delicate Armor

Bishop's eye is interested in collecting and controlling; a lot of the time, she is not "in" the poem so much as "behind" it. She directs the reader's gaze from one object to the other, all from behind the lens. The distance between her and her subject is the same as the one that is between the camera and the subject photographed, and this distance is reflected in writing through her sobriety and quiet subtlety, and through the importance she grants the act of observing.

Pickard notes:

the central goal of her poetry is not so much to relate an emotional experience (though it may) as to trigger one in the reader. To put it in these terms adds a layer of meaning to the discussion of her use of intensive imagery in that her

intensive poetics is organized around controlling the reader's imagination directly rather than inspiring it to vibrate sympathetically in the Romantic style. Intensive imagery is an essentially rhetorical process, and, not surprisingly, Aristotle endorses the process of "bringing-before-the-eyes" in his *Rhetoric* (245). [...] Romanticism rejected such a rhetorical approach, choosing to describe the effect of an object (often a landscape) on the poet's sensibility rather than the object itself, effectively cutting the reader off from direct contact with the physicality of the object described. Bishop reverses this process. [...] an intensive imagery allows Bishop to fix and control the objects of description, [...] to control the reaction of the reader." (Pickard, 35)

Bishop's descriptions have indeed been accused of being coldly objective, as she does not get involved in the process and appears to be a neutral observer. She writes poems that seem extremely simple and sober (even dry, would say her detractors) at first sight. Carefully composed with chosen details, they are scenes laid out under the eyes of the reader to trigger a unique emotional response. Bishop uses "intensive imagery,"<sup>6</sup> as a way to cope with a reality of sorrow and absence.

It is very much the case in a poem like "Sestina." In this poem, the reader is brought to observe a scene between a grandmother and her grandchild. Instead of talking about the feelings of love and loss that the reader is bound to feel reading the poem, Bishop carefully steps away from the language of feelings and emotions. Although a delicate

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<sup>6</sup> I think "obsessive" imagery might even be more accurate. Bishop's poems are made of moons, tears, maps, colors (blue, iridescent silver, yellowish), water drops, oil, to name only the most famous ones. These images come back over and over, and they become landmarks, places to stop, reconsider, readjust the gaze. They become familiar and soothing but at the same time they are never the same, showing once more Bishop's skills at dislodging the familiar.



poem about life and its silent dramas, about the fragile balance between loss and love, restraint and intense emotion, she never uses such words in her poem which makes the scene even more intensely emotional. What Bishop does in this poem is turn feelings into images through the language of the senses and experience. The repetition of the six end-words “Grand-mother,” “almanac,” “house,” “tears,” “stove” and “child” slowly creates a strange scene that seems a simple domestic one but is in fact suffused with intense emotions that the reader feels little by little. The six repeating end-words act as markers, allowing the poem to be looked at as a photograph: a scene frozen in time as Bishop connects all the elements of the poem through the nagging repetition of these words and creates a place. The tears are those of the grandmother but also those of the teakettle, and of the rain that beats on the house, of the almanac, and of the child’s drawing. The images are vivid and encompass the entire place in a meaningful web, as our gaze is directed to the “small hard tears / [that] dance like mad on the hot black stove / the way the rain must dance on the house.”

In “Sestina,” the tears that come back in every stanza are the only obvious marks of pain. Indeed, the concrete language of the poem establishes a respectful distance with the emotions and feelings that are beneath the surface. Depictions of everyday routine - “the iron kettle sings on the stove,” “it’s time for tea now,” - fill the poem, evading the sense of loss and sadness that a more abstract language would convey in a more romantic way. Words like “pain”, “loss”, “sadness” that I use in my analysis are absent from the poem. Bishop’s poems are “images [that] do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality”(Sontag, 4). Precisely, Bishop does not want to relate an emotional experience, as Pickard explains. Instead, the goal

of her poetry is more to trigger this experience, to make it happen as if it were reality, controlling the reader's imagination directly instead of inspiring it to vibrate. In that sense, the poem creates a sense of presence, the presence of this pain and loss, rather than (as in Romantic poetry) relate an experience already lived. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Rosalind Krauss writes that the photograph gives a sense of presence:

Photography's vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freezing of presence. [...] It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space, at a given moment is present to everything else. It is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real. The photo carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance. (Krauss, 107)

A photograph is not an explanation of the real. It is an invitation to look, to observe, to see a slice of the real frozen in time and place by the finger of the photographer pressing the shutter release. In the same manner, Bishop catches the laugh, the tears, the rain, this moment of subdued pain and loss between paper and pen and froze them forever in a poem. This moment in Bishop's poetry can be caught thanks to a close attention to details (the six end-words of the sestina). In *Camera Lucida*, this detail (a detail made plural in Bishop's poem) that catches the eye is what Roland Barthes refers to as the punctum: "...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. [...] A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 27). Therefore, the strength of a photograph comes from this detail but also from the capacity of the one looking at a photograph to notice it. Bishop's poem functions in the same manner: her trained eye

sees and seizes the forced laugh, the mysterious man in the drawing, and directs the reader's gaze to these transient moments that are what makes her poem so intense.

In *The Photographer's Eye*, John Szarkowski writes about the question of vantage point and perspective in photography: "Much has been said about the clarity of photography, but little has been said about its obscurity. And yet it is photography that has taught us to see from the unexpected vantage point, and has shown us pictures that give the sense of the scene, while withholding its narrative meaning" (Szarkowski, unpaginated). This photograph taken in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century by an unknown photographer is doing precisely that. There is no story here but raw emotion for the viewer looking at these two little girls playing around a Christmas tree made with a broom and ornaments of fortune (see photo 7). There is the strong pathos of the photograph, but there is also something extremely natural about it. The gestures photographed show that loss and lack are simply part of the fabric of their lives, and they are neither crying nor looking sad. It is simply how things are, and how they are shown without a fuss or judgment. The details or circumstances are unknown, and they do no matter. In the same way, Bishop withholds the story in "Sestina." The reader isn't told who the man in the drawing is, why the grandmother hides her tears, where the mother is. These elements are simply there, as tokens of reality. The poem is a window on the inside of a home's domestic scene. The presence of Bishop's "camera-pen" pushes the eye to pay attention to little details as I explained earlier: the six end-words are the main "actors" of the scene carefully selected.

### 3. Framing the Real

In Bishop's poetry, observation is fundamental. It is a way to immerse oneself in reality and absorb it to gain some sort of control over a world that is never fully understandable and tamable. She creates places in which she can live in her poems, precisely because the world is infinite and uncontrollable, and can only be lived in once cut into units and slices of time and space. Even in a poem such as "In the Waiting Room," in which she is clearly the speaker, there is an attempt at staying behind the camera and controlling vision. More specifically, creating these images is a way of coping with the difficulty of an ever-moving reality that was, for Bishop, a reality of uprooting and never belonging. In "In the Waiting Room," Bishop recalls a terrifying childhood memory that took place in the waiting room at the dentist when she was seven years old. Markers of time are everywhere in the poem: her age, the day and year, the weather and the state. The last words of the poem are the exact date of the memory - "fifth / of February, 1918," - likening the poem to an old photograph dated on the back. They ground the existential crisis experienced by the young Elizabeth in a specific slice of time but also function as concrete markers framing the experience that she is holding on to not to fall "into cold, blue-black space." Reading the *National Geographic*, she suddenly hears her aunt cry out in the dentist's office. The reading of these unfamiliar stories and the cry trigger a series of questions:

Suddenly, from inside,

came an oh! of pain

-Aunt Consuelo's voice-

not very loud or long.

I wasn't at all surprised;

even then I knew she was a foolish woman.

I might have been embarrassed,

but wasn't. What took me

completely by surprise

was that it was me;

my voice, in my mouth.

Without thinking at all

I was my foolish aunt,

I -we- were falling, falling

The poem presents, in the most prosaic language, a young girl's moment of awakening to the forces that shape individual identity through the perception of otherness. At first, it can seem paradoxical that this poem chooses such simple language to talk about an extremely unnerving situation. In fact, the language of this poem seems to suggest that one can make the strange and scary normal and orderly by putting ordinary words in ordinary places. The "vertigo" (Vendler), the metaphysical doubt that seven-year-old Elizabeth goes through, is triggered by a sound and by the

disturbing images of the magazine. Bishop does not yield to abstraction and instead offers a visual representation of the inner struggle her young self goes through. Here, she not only captures a moment in a specific time and place but she expands it and re-creates it. What is even more interesting is that the poetic device that she uses to maintain this distance between herself and this world slipping underneath her is to focus on describing it: the unfamiliar faces of the *National Geographic* that she is reading, all these people in the waiting room with her. In this poem, the process of describing becomes a process of making sense of. She brings the reader to her height, and here we are, thrown into a frame of knees and boots, hands and coats. To retain her sense of identity or rather try to make sense of it, she focuses her attention on the details of what she can see and understand: the immediate world around her. Her mind is grappling to create a frame in which she can exist and try to find cohesion, unity of self. As she “gives a sidelong glance,” and looks at others, she notes “similarities-- / boots, hands, the family voice” and her questioning becomes more precise, even if she does not get answers. Her poetics of description come between her and the world as an essential tool to preserve her identity and construct it as a poet.

And yet, in another way, the poem suggests through its flashes of menacing imagery (“a dead man slung on a pole,” naked women with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs”) that just beneath the individual attempt at rational agency, organization and stabilization of the self, there is irrevocable otherness, ready to erupt like the volcano pictured in the dentist's office copy. Young Elizabeth does not experience a Wordsworthian harmonious epiphany with the world, but rather the terror of a force that squashes her together with other people (her aunt, whose scream “from

inside" seems to be her own, the women in the National Geographic Magazine with "horrifying" breasts). Framing this experience, labeling time and place, hanging on to the concrete world surrounding it are essential tools to avoid being spun out of orbit "into cold, blue-black space."

In "Sestina," the six repeating end-words create this "box" in which reality is condensed, a tight poetic grip in which the reader is caught, prisoner of the kitchen and its materiality, with no real means to escape. The reader is held in the "rigid house" of the sestina, as Bishop takes advantage of the highly structured form to better protect a the gulf of grief and loss one might fall into if not kept at bay and observed from a distance. The sestina, much like a photograph, is a frame in which Bishop has carefully observed and collected information, offering a slice of a reality viewed through the poet's eyes. The question of confinement is essential to Bishop's poetry because it is the selection and framing of the world that enables a form of understanding, that gives access to some kind of knowledge, however little it is:

Bishop places herself, and vicariously her reader, in a trap in which we have to see something. That sense of necessity driving the poetry [...] may make the reader feel variously boxed in or fixed on visible details, but also privy to a special kind of illumination that occurs only through dark-chambered words" (Riggs, 51)

Bishop's descriptions reveal a sort of powerlessness in the face of infinite and irremediable loss that can be coped with, to a certain extent, by "watching" closely.

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood

built somewhat like a box. No. Built

like several boxes in descending sizes

one above the other.

[...]

It is an artifact of

of wood.

[...]

But roughly but adequately it can shelter

what is within (which after all

cannot have been intended to be seen).

It is the beginning of a painting,

a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,

and all of wood. Watch it closely.

("The Monument")

The box, the room, are where the image takes form and exists. As a poet, Bishop selects what goes in the frame of the poem, and like a photographer, she is in full control of what goes in this frame. The frame announces the camera's ability to find and isolate the world's constant writing, which is a tool that is very important in Bishop's



poetry because it is how she creates places and moments of knowledge and understanding that are always felt as momentary, confused, painful and lost. It is difficult to know the world, to know oneself, Bishop seems to say. It burns at the touch, it is briny on the tongue and it flows constantly, already gone, already lost, as in "At the Fishhouses." But one can reach some kind of knowledge if one accepts knowing it the way the mind works: by dividing its movement into units that can be grasped.

## CHAPTER III

### Wherever Home May Be

The Man-Moth is hopeful he will reach the moon and go live beyond its round opening, yet he falls every time. In “Death in Nova Scotia,” little Arthur seems ready to go play at the court of the nobles in the painting, yet he remains forever stuck in his little coffin. And “In the Waiting Room,” little Elizabeth finds herself in the whirlwind of a crisis she cannot make much sense of. Indeed, the creation of these images is by no means a resolution to the pain and loss that is the core of Bishop’s artistic inspiration. As I have mentioned, there is no epiphany in her poetry, as if all one can do is acknowledge the loss and turn it into art. This artistic journey, the composition of these images, might be the transitional place where she dwells. So far, I have focused on Bishop’s ability to go back in the stream of Time and pick out these moments, images of her past. In this chapter, I will look at her interest in flux, movement, and the process of the mind at work. In her poetry, identity and place are provisional, perceived in motion. Never fixed, they float disconnected in a past she searches for a sense of belonging. Her poetry seeks to unite them in order to create, in her slowly and carefully crafted collections of poems, a retroactive home, an image of home that takes shape in a “photo album” that each of these poems constitute.

## 1. Bishop's Hopeful Art of Failure

Bishop's poetry possesses a fragile strength but it is also humble and incredibly lucid concerning the limits of Art's powers and the powers of the poet. The images she composes from the observation of her memories are not a means to transcend these memories, in which respect Bishop differs from American romantic tradition, highlights Costello:

...if she sees memory, with Wordsworth, Yeats, Proust, Baudelaire, and others, as her primary creative resource, it is not a means of transcendence. As she developed away from these influences, she resisted idealizations of the past. Bishop's childhood is not free from spatial and temporal constraints; memory is not recuperation. Instead, Bishop views memory as a thread of life, a dynamic principle of limited continuity in a world of discontinuities. (Costello, 175)

Indeed, there is no solace gained from the memories she explores, from the memory of the landscapes she visited. In American Romantic poetry, nature is a place of peace that transcends all. In Bishop's travel poems, the reader is left with more questions about the nature of home and otherness, and unstable, mysterious answers, along with a feeling of nostalgia and lack of closure. The child narrators are not endowed with an aura of innocence and pure perspective as childhood is not a holy and ideal place for Bishop to go back to. She visualizes the past but does not idealize it, and when she becomes more abstract, the concreteness of this abstraction seems to be just another

way of showing that closure and peace remain inaccessible because they cannot be told in any way. The paradox of her poetry is that the images she composes do not stabilize memories and fix them for ever, but instead expose the limitations of language and of the poet to resolve pain, grief and loss through the power of words. In Bishop's poetry, words can only tell of this struggle, over and over again, without reaching a conclusion.

The photograph, in its filtering of reality and its immediate presence, does not offer to transcend reality either. In *The Photographer's Eye*, Szarkowski notes:

[the photographer] could only record [the truth] as he found it, and it was found in nature in a fragmented and unexplained form - not as a story. The photographer could not assemble these clues into a coherent narrative, he could only isolate the fragment, document it, and by so doing claim for it some special significance, a meaning which went beyond simple description. The compelling clarity with which a photograph recorded the trivial suggested that the subject had never before been properly seen, that it was in fact perhaps *not* trivial, but filled with undiscovered meaning. (Szarkowski, unpaginated)

What photography offers is a more perceptive form of seeing and observing; it suggests "undiscovered meaning," but it does not expose it. Indeed, in the very act of taking a photograph there is a form of surrender. First of all, it is a lucid gesture that involves the full knowledge that Time is passing and that it cannot be stopped. Secondly, it acknowledges the fact that this image taken is the only fragment of this instant in time

and place that will remain in a tangible way -as more than a memory- and that this reality is the only thing that can be truly known. And yet, the picture is taken, and out of the movement of life the artist has created the photograph that was invisible a second before and would have remained invisible forever had the photograph not been taken. Bishop's poems are fragments of a past she struggles to preserve and make sense of. The real thing is gone (or was never there to begin with) and these poems form a set of written images that are at once Art's beautiful attempt at beating Time and preserving (or creating) the "real thing" but also proof that little can be known and all there is to do is observe and suggest. Indeed, "the art of losing isn't hard to master" (Bishop, "One Art"), and accepting these limitations might be the path to peace and artistic realization: "I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. / I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster" (Bishop, "One Art").

Sontag notes that "photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible. ... One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images" (Sontag, 163) What Bishop offers as well are images of a transcendent reality, and can only offer that. Access to this abstraction remains in the dark, with only glimpses of meager light to guide us. This philosophy leads her to write ekphrastic poems that reflect the mind working through these questions. It is about accepting memories in their imperfect representations and taking them nonetheless as "the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust. Not much" (Bishop, "Poem"). Bishop's imagination is the tool to re-insufflate life, to animate again the fragment, the image she took from her memories. Costello notes: "Bishop admits her imagination as a faculty projecting change onto what is fixed, rather than, more conventionally, fixing

what is mutable. [...] The sense of seeing nature as one sees a painting, inferring a dynamic quality within the fixed form, recurs in Bishop's work and notes." In one of her notebooks of 1934, Bishop writes: "I dreamed last night of paintings that wouldn't stay still - the colors moved inside the frames, the objects moved up closer and then further back, the whole thing changed from portrait to scenery and back again-keeping the same lines all the time." "Large Bad Picture" and "Poem" are two poems that are representative of this idea, as they bring her memories to life in the present and turn them into active forces.

In both poems the strength of the descriptions is that they blur the line between the painting they are describing and the real landscape the painting is representing. In both poems the first stanza serves as an introduction: "before he became a school teacher / a great-uncle painted a big picture" ("Large Bad Picture"). "-his little painting (a sketch for a larger one?) / has never earned any money in its life" ("Poem"). Here, Bishop seems to resign herself to defeat. But it is only a feint, because she carefully retrieves the movement of the memory and turns the painting around by confusing the lines between reality and image, which only the power of imagination can achieve:

Receding for miles on either side  
into a flushed, still sky  
are overhanging pale blue cliffs  
hundreds of feet high,  
("Large Bad Picture")

The second stanza already detaches from the painting and introduces ambiguity as to what is being described simply by changing the scale: miles and feet suggest that the speaker is doing more than describing the painting; she is visualizing, through the painting, the original landscape represented as if they were re-taking the painter's creative path through words. As the poem unfolds, the reader forgets that the poem is about a painting as "one can hear their (the fine black birds) crying, crying, / the only sound there is / except for occasional sighing / as a large aquatic animal breathes." The painting is moving and heaving at this point with the life the poem insufflates it, maybe with the life the memory of the seen painting evoked the beholder. In many ways, Bishop's ekphrastic poems are an exercise in turning memory into an active presence in the present.

The second poem, "Poem," is representative of this idea. She is drawing the reader's attention to a tiny, insignificant painting that was handed down within her family and that no one paid attention to. Bishop, as is a feature of American photography, gives a voice to the trivial, the forgotten, "suggest[ing] that the subject had never before been properly seen, that it was in fact perhaps *not* trivial..." (Szarkowski) In the same movement as in "Large Bad Picture," the line between the landscape represented by the painting and the description of the painting is blurred, even if less so. It is more a movement of back and forth between paint and reality that also hints at the painting process itself:

It must be Nova Scotia; only there  
does one see gabled wooden houses  
painted that awful shade of brown.

[...]

Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,  
fresh-squiggled from the tube.

[...]

A specklike bird is flying to the left.  
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

The question mark and slow movement through the painting's description reveal an effort of memory on the part of the speaker. It is as if the act of visualizing the painting was precisely the way to the memory of what the painting represents: "Heavens, I recognize this place, I know it! / It's behind-I can almost remember the farmer's name." The last stanza gives way to a reflection, a meditation on this "translation" that took place between the uncle and the niece, in their respective vision of the same place that traveled through time to coincide in her poem:

I never knew him. We both knew this place,  
apparently, this literal small backwater,  
looked at it long enough to memorize it,  
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,  
or its memory is [...]

Our visions coincided-"visions" is  
too serious a word-our looks, two looks:  
art "copying from life" and life itself,



life and the memory of it so compressed  
they've turned into each other. Which is which?

To some extent, this last stanza echoes in a more lengthy way the last lines of "Large Bad Picture": "Apparently they (the ships) have reached their destination. / It would be hard to say what brought them here, / commerce or contemplation." In many ways, Bishop uses memory as a tool to reveal Art as a will to move, to travel distances between mind and world, between ways of seeing.

Life and the memory of it cramped,  
on a piece of Bristol board,  
dim, but how live, how touching in detail  
- the little that we get for free,  
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.

At the end of "One Poem," as she accepts that there is little to hold on to, there is still the rhythm of the stubborn in these lines. The repetition of the absence ("the little," "not much") becomes a presence, a statement of quiet and small victory in the defeat, as she finishes the poem by going back to the painting (or is it the real?):

About the size of our abidance  
along with theirs: the munching cows,  
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water

still standing from spring freshets,  
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Bishop's philosophy that what can be known is only what can be observed and what can be remembered, and that it is little, is a simple acceptance of the limitations of language's powers. This idea leads her to stray away from the "end product" (which can never be fully known) to focus on the way the mind works, to the journey to the goal instead of the goal itself. What is interesting for Bishop is not where one is going, but rather the dynamics of the travels, the dialectic of home and abroad, the movement of the mind searching, groping for understanding, asking questions.

## 2. Questions of Travel

Bishop's sense of homelessness and interest in movement are expressed in her constant traveling, which led her to be labeled (to some extent) as a travel writer/poet. But as Adrienne Rich and Helen Vendler justly note, "foreign abroad, foreign at home, Bishop appointed herself a poet of foreignness, which [...] is, far more than "travel," her subject. [...] Whatever knowledge Bishop owned, it was the knowledge of the homeless and the migrant" (Vendler, 287-289). The motion of loss -and somewhat failure- that is at work in Bishop's poetry brings about the formation of poems which reveal a longing for a place to which one can belong. There are two places that have a special place in her heart and in her art: Nova Scotia and Brazil, "one the permanent place of her displaced childhood, the other the permanent place of her middle age" (Vendler, 287).

What is most striking about the poems she dedicates to these places is that they are both places where she is at home and where she is estranged.

Once she moved south to Brazil, she began a poetic journey back north to Nova Scotia. The geography of the two places erects a contrast: the stasis of Nova Scotia where things seem congealed in time [“A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village [...] a slight stain on those pure blue skies...” (“In the Village”)] and the rush of Brazil [“There are too many waterfalls here” (“Questions of Travel”)]. As she was a foreigner in Brazil, the childhood home that she revisited in her poems was never more familiar and never more strange. And yet, her poems about Nova Scotia (as “The Moose” shows) reveal that she was a careful and remote traveler to her past, a bit nervous and mocking of the people, the events and the places. As usual, she conducted this journey back into her mind as though behind a thick lens that revealed only what she was willing to let show: not too much, not too intensely.

“The Moose” is a poem that resulted from one of her adult visits to Nova Scotia. In this poem, the narrator is traveling by bus: “Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog. / The bus starts.” In this poem, the narrator<sup>7</sup> is leaving Nova Scotia and her voice is that of a mere observer throughout the poem up until the end, when the narrator finally gets involved: “why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet joy? / “Curious creatures,” / says our quiet driver.” There is a sense of restlessness that can be felt throughout her collections of poems. Indeed, although Nova Scotia is where she is rooted, this poem is about leaving it. The voice seems deliberately that of an outside observer: the only time the narrator acknowledges that she is part of the scenes, is only as a passenger in the

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<sup>7</sup> I will refer to the narrator of this poem as “she” for it is reasonable to assume that this narrator might be a projection of Bishop herself on one of her trips leaving Nova Scotia.

bus. She is not staying, she doesn't participate in the chatter of the other passengers and separates herself from them with adverbs such as "childishly." The narrator belongs to the bus in the sense that it is synonym of movement, but there is no social connection with the people traveling with her. Even when she admits to a shared feeling of inexplicable wonder at seeing the moose stop in front of the bus, the tone is perplexed: "why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" In fact, the driver's comment about the creatures in a stanza right after these lines introduces doubt as to who the curious creatures are: the moose, or the people in the bus that Bishop mostly refers to as snoring, groaning, as participating in "old conversation[s] not concerning us [her]"? Nova Scotia is a place that can only be inhabited in memory, a place too disconnected from her for her to participate and that becomes exotic to her, in a way. And yet she is a knowing observer, an observer who has lived there and knows what the sunsets look like, an observer who is not at home anymore but who feels the place as if it were still home:

From narrow provinces,  
of fish and bread and tea,  
home of the long tides  
where the bay leaves the sea  
twice a day and takes  
the herrings long rides,

where if the river  
enters or retreats  
in a wall of brown foam  
depends on if it meets  
the bay coming in,  
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,  
sometimes the sun sets  
facing a red sea,  
and others, veins the flats'  
lavender, rich mud  
in burning rivulets ...

The narrator in Bishop's poetry thus holds a strange position between observer and participant, always in exile. If she does offer active meditations about the experiences of home and travel and the role of memory in their shaping, the experience is a personal, purely human one whose nostalgia is more personally than historically driven. Her images are essentially devoid of social or political associations, much like photographs turn any moment or event into a unique, personal instant of seeing. Her obsession with observation and sight draws her to personal experiences and marginal figures that are cursed, in a way, by the burden of clear-sightedness and lucidity. For example, in her prose poems she endows the crab, the toad and the snail with personalities that go

beyond mere personification. These grotesque animals, at once envisioned as lonely, absurd and yet beautiful, are images of the poet and endowed with the poet's powers to see too well. They know harsh realities that cast them aside as freaks and marginals, even amongst themselves:

The giant toad says:

"My eyes bulge and hurt[...]they see too much, above, below, and yet there is not much to see[...]I feel my colors changing now, my pigments gradually shudder and shift over...

The strayed crab says:

"I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself [...] My shell is tough and tight[...]I admire compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world."

The giant snail says:

"I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks [...] That toad was too big, too, like me [...] Our proportions horrify our neighbors [...] Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining [...] But O! I am too big. I feel it. Pity me."

The marginal in Bishop's poetry lives in between statuses and places, on the fringe of what is seen as normal, a privileged observer whose distance from the world endows her with deep insight and understanding, whose strange non-intervention is a form of participation, much as the photographer who stands behind the camera is also an outsider. Bishop's poems are very specific "wordscapes" that tell the story of not belonging and of trying to find a home.

Because Bishop evolves in transitional spaces -between land and sea, reality and expectation, reality and dream, on railroads, buses, boats, etc.- her travel poems all reflect a discrepancy. Place is never fixed and always in movement in Bishop's art. As Vendler notes, three of her books have geographical names: *North and South*, *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*. Interestingly enough, this obsession with visualizing place and home only takes the reader on a journey that never stops, never fixes anywhere, revealing the dislocation of the soul: "she feels a geographer's compulsions precisely because she is a foreigner, not a native" (Vendler, 287). In a chapter entitled "Excursive Sight," Costello remarks that:

Bishop's poetry gives us little besides transitional places. Her "homes" tend to be constructed out of old buses or railroad ties. The traveler must accept a constant slippage of reality, the sense of each "arrival" marking a point of departure toward an elusive destination. Ports (and bights, waiting rooms, islands) cannot be fixed in representation. (Costello, 141)

“Questions of Travel” is a poem that perfectly reflects this challenge that the traveler always faces, this eternal unknown, unfamiliar, and the impossibility of defining home as one is always in transit. From the beginning, Bishop expresses mixed feelings towards travel and the places she visits. In “Questions of Travel,” she explores what it means to travel with imported behaviors. She comments on the irony of different cultures clashing, as the tourist becomes traveler through the disappointment of realizing the gap between the reality of the place and the expectations of the tourist.

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams  
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,  
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops  
makes them spill over the side in soft slow-motion,  
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

[...]

The speaker starts with an image of spectacular disappointment, in the frustrated voice of the one who feels out of place and who feels their expectations are deceived. The waterfalls crowd the landscape, overwhelming the tourist’s mental picture with the strength of their presence. This poem puts in motion the still mental image in the tourist’s mind, challenging anchored ways of seeing by relocating the “I” and the eye in the movement of loss and exile Bishop’s speakers are caught in. The poem moves between reality and cliché, reality and expectations, showing the evolution of the “I” as the eye learns to see through the eyes of the traveler, the one who asks questions.



Think of the long trip home.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

Where should we be today?

[...]

What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life

in our bodies, we are determined to rush

to see the sun the other way around?

The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?

To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,

[...]

And have we room

for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

What Bishop captures in this poem is an image of the fundamental instability of the mind, of being a creature of dusty images caught in a world of movement. The second stanza lists these clichés, these objects of our touristic desires, in clear, simple images: “the tiniest green hummingbird,” “inexplicable stonework,” etc. Their listing, one after the other, “everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” (“Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance”) presented in a series of questions, constitutes a picture of the mind at work. It also annihilates the sense of truth and absoluteness that they seem to carry with them. Vendler notes that Bishop had a “suspicion that truth has something annihilating about it” (Vendler, 298-9), and she set herself as observer -almost informer- of these images that stop growth, thinking and learning.

The speaker undergoes a transformation from tourist to traveller, the artist who has learned to observe and see, the artist whose art only exists in its constant questioning and lucid acknowledgement of dislocation:

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?  
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right  
about just sitting quietly in one’s room?”*

*Continent, city, country, society:  
the choice is never wide and never free.  
And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?”*

In this ending, the speaker doesn’t make a decision. Home is unknown, unfamiliar, but so is abroad. There is no resolution, but at least one certitude that the poem explores in the third stanza:

But surely it would have been a pity  
not to have seen the trees along this road,  
really exaggerated in their beauty,  
not to have seen them gesturing  
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.

One cannot get out of the experience of loss and dislocation because it is a necessary experience to learn to see, to take the time to stop and re-imagine those places we poorly designed in our minds. It is about replacing the tourist Bishop often makes fun of with the traveler who thinks and observes with a pen in hand, the way the photographer connects imagination and reality in a way that can be painful because it is the precise moment when they clash and question each other.

### 3. Bishop's Proto-Dream-House

"I've never felt particularly homeless, but then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess it's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it with him" Bishop told Alexandra Johnson in an interview (cited in Travisano, 131). The way Bishop thinks of home is by never fixing it. It might be a way of coping with its fundamental absence, but it might also be, more positively, a way of always preserving its mutating integrity, its fundamental movement. There is no unshakable theory of being in Bishop's poetry because there is no absolute and fixed definition of home. The first poem of her collection *North & South* is entitled "The Map," and yet more than a cartographer Bishop is a geographer, as her poems never fix a notion of place, home, and people into a specific image but rather challenge these notions and their meaning. As the genesis of "The Man-Moth" is a typo in a newspaper article in which "mammoth" became "manmoth," "The Map" also stems from a simple observation: on a map only colors allow to distinguish where land begins and water stops. If you get them wrong, the perception of each is confusing. From this simple observation, Bishop elaborates a

map that is at once an imaginary world of its own and a meditation on the act of representing. And so the map for Bishop is a tool to disrupt and suggest that the fascination with creating small representations of the real world can be a way to give ourselves a sense a place, sense of place that can only happen through representation, by appropriation, and that in a way only exists in our imagination.

The dialectic of home and abroad is never resolved as Bishop makes her home in its movement of back and forth, in the accumulation of experiences, meaningless or not. It is in the movement of observing and connecting that Bishop finds a place for her identity and poetry. In previous chapters, I have dwelled upon the idea that Bishop's poetry is disorienting on some level, as the way she reorganizes her experience through her poems often is an exercise in defamiliarizing the familiar and vice versa. Precisely, being disoriented and disorienting the reader is Bishop's art at its peak because it is a mode in which she is most comfortable. As Vendler puts it, "Bishop's avoidance of closure through certainty or through social solidarity, in favor of closure in questioning, loss, or inscrutability" (Vendler, 299) is a creative path to a deeper region, a home that she had to create entirely on her own and that is a shifting ground. Bishop is interested in the moment and place where the smooth fabric of normalcy tears, in finding this instant of imbalance because it is where she spends her life, trying to find a place for herself and her poetry.

In "The End of March," Bishop describes the perfect house for the poet/artist to retire to. The poem starts with a walk on a windy beach. To convey the size and sweep of the landscape, Bishop ironically uses minimalist descriptions:

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day

to take a walk on that long beach.

Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,  
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,  
seabirds in ones or twos.

The rackety, icy, offshore wind  
numbed our faces on one side;  
disrupted the formation  
of a lone flight of Canada geese;  
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers  
in upright, steely mist.

This is a cold journey on a windy beach to the “proto-dream-house” that turns out to be boarded up. And so the imagination opens it up because it has been seen often enough to hold in memory, because it doesn’t need to be opened to exist: the poet’s humorous imagination turns “that crooked box / set up on pilings, shingled green, / a sort of artichoke of a house,” that dubious place, into the abode the artist eventually can’t reach. “And that day the wind was much too cold / even to get that far, / and of course the house was boarded up.” The travelers on the lonely beach aren’t even able to make it within sight of the house - cold finality. The dream-home cannot be reached, so Bishop makes an image of it, takes a picture of it through the lens of her imagination:

I’d like to retire there and do nothing,  
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:

look through binoculars, read boring books,  
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,  
talk to myself, and, foggy days,  
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.

And yet, the narrator envisions a place where “nothing” is what happens; boring books, useless notes, talking to oneself in a solipsistic, repetitive movement. And thus the house of the artist is not really this little home where nothing happens. Indeed, after a lifetime of wandering -New England, New York, Key West, Brazil, and elsewhere- there is no real settling because this lack of home, this longing for a home, this never-ending journey is what fuels the poetic creation. In its closing lines, the poem offers an insight of clarifying beauty and affirmation:

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.  
The sun came out for just a minute.  
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,  
the drab, damp, scattered stones  
were multi-colored,  
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,  
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.  
They could have been teasing the lion sun,  
except that now he was behind them  
--a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,

making those big, majestic paw prints,  
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

Here is Bishop's habit of turning to the everyday for consolation, making jewelry out of the humble stones. The pictures she takes of the everyday are the home holding together this movement of seeking and missing, of losing, over and over again. Lack is filled with the joy of creation, as Bishop makes a poem woven from the fabric of missed chances and irrevocable outcomes.

Bishop never enters the perfect house for the poet, maybe because it is only perfect as long as it remains a dream. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard beautifully wrote about this house that we try to make for ourselves: a dream house that in the end we never inhabit because it would be disappointing:

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home.... Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts

- serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality. (Bachelard, 61)

Bishop's collection of poems gives the reader an insight into her proto-dream-house, this house that will always be the place at the end of the road, but the journey never

ends. Bishop was a poet without a fixed home or country, but this place is in the background of every poem she carefully crafts. It is made of each of these poems. The home of the transient is the accumulation of images gleaned in travel. Bishop, a poet who quietly writes about “the joy, sorrow and wonder of being human” (Gioia) made her “crypto-dream-house” out of these images, a collection of poems one can go back to as one would open a photo-album and dwell in the present past of one’s life. The patient reserve of her craft is an expression of her uncompromising lucidity. She knew that leaving the “state of impermanence” was impossible and probably delusional. Her art remains, provocatively quiet, forever immediate.

Bachelard is a great help in understanding Bishop’s inhabiting of oneiric space, as each of her poems is deeply personal: “A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard, 47) Bishop’s poem “The Monument,” which I have briefly mentioned earlier, shelters life and experience because it is endowed with the poet’s creative force:

But roughly but adequately it can shelter  
what is within (which after all  
cannot have been intended to be seen).  
It is the beginning of a painting,  
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,  
and all of wood. Watch it closely.



The poet inhabits this space, transforming it into a work of art. Again, it is not finished work but a beginning. Again, the reader is invited to come and inhabit this space, if only by “watch[ing] it closely.”

Almost all of Bishop’s poems stem from memory, from a past she tries to make sense of to shed light on the present. Interestingly enough, her poetics make visual these childhood or later memories by literally re-presenting them, giving them “an iconic and [...] an active, continuous relation, [...] to the perception of the present” (Costello, 176). Bishop’s poetics visualize the past, whether it is fictionalized or not, and let it inform the present. Costello sees in this movement a desire for unity, “a principle of unity moving through time which connects the consciousness to its past” (Costello, 192). Bishop is using the power of the image, its sensitivity, its intrinsic wholeness, to seek this unity that she can somewhat reach through her collection of poems. However, as Bachelard justly notes:

The poetic image [...] is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away. because of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own. [...] In this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being. (Bachelard, xii)

Bishop draws on her past, visualizes it, but her poetry is only a reverberation of it, as accurate as it might be. Her constant questions and provocative ambiguity are the

expression of this knowledge that the past is gone and that what she is doing is recalling images of this past to make new images in the present. And it is a presence that is created, vivid and raw like a photograph.

## Conclusion

Interdisciplinary works have been criticized for their lack of rigor. Indeed, it can be difficult to demonstrate a high degree of knowledge and specialization in two different fields as one brings them together in a comparative study, without forsaking their integrity or misconstruing them. It is about learning the ways and methods of each discipline, and in my case, showing how one might inform the other, and maybe vice versa. Comparing photography's aesthetics and techniques to Bishop's descriptive practices allows for a different perspective on her work. More simply, it allows for different ways of talking about Bishop's poetics of description, an aspect of her poetry that has been the subject of many studies.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, Elizabeth Bishop has been praised for her eye and the strength of her descriptive powers. In *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, Bonnie Costello examines Bishop's unique qualities as an observer, exploring the connection between the poet's descriptive passion and her often ekphrastic imagination. Zachariah Pickard, in *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Description*, engages the exactitude and accuracy of Bishop's poetry and the importance of the process of observation in her works. In *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery*, David Kalstone pays close attention as well to the subtleties of her imagery, exploring the autobiographical aspect of her poetry. Other critics such as Sarah Riggs have also written more specifically about the "optical" quality of Bishop's descriptive powers. In *Word Sightings, Poetry and Visual Media in*

*Stevens, Bishop and O'Hara*, Riggs focuses on demonstrating the intensity of the visual experience by commenting on Bishop's poetic style in visual terms. I have drawn on some of these critics to build my own analysis, and they are only a few amongst many others who have tackled the question of Bishop's image-making powers.

Indeed, the dilemma of the critics who choose to write about their favorite poet is that they might run into a well of research and criticism that's already there and that has already said (probably better than you could ever say it) everything there is to say. Or so it seems. My endeavor was not only to find new ways to talk about Bishop, it was also to reveal and maybe renew the connections that there are between Arts and how they can benefit each other. In 1939, French poet Paul Valery wrote a public address in honor of the Centenary of Photography:

So it must be agreed, then, that bromide proves stronger than ink, whenever the mere presence of things suffices, whenever the thing speaks for itself without benefit of proxy, that is, without having recourse to wholly arbitrary transmissions of a language.

As for myself, I see no harm whatsoever in this, and am strongly inclined to believe that it might in a way benefit literature. I mean that the proliferation of photographic images I mentioned could indirectly work to the advantage of Letters, Belles-Lettres that is. Or rather, Letters that truly merit that adjective. If photography, which is now capable of conveying color and movement, not to mention depth, discourages us from describing, it is because we are thus reminded of the limits of articulate language and are advised, as writers, to put

our tools to a use more benefiting their true nature. A literature would purify itself if left to other modes of expression and production the tasks which they can perform more effectively, and devoted itself to ends it alone can accomplish. It would this protect itself and advance along its true paths, one of which leads toward the perfecting of language that constructs or expounds abstract thought, the other exploring all the variety of poetic patterns and resonances.

Valery saw positively the advent of photography as challenging writers to sharpen their literary tools and push the boundaries of their art. And indeed, photography is not only a source of inspiration and stimulation, it is also inextricably linked to the way literature conceptualizes its art. Valery adds: “we speak figuratively of clarity, reflection, speculation, lucidity, and ideas; and, when trying to express abstract thought, we avail ourselves of a whole visual rhetoric.” On the one hand, there is something to say for the fact that the criticism enveloping Bishop’s poetry is expressed through this visual rhetoric: it is a way to palliate to the inadequacies of language in the field of creating images. Bishop writes poems that remain as close as possible to the visual experience of reality, and so it makes sense that the vocabulary to study her poetry be drawn from the art that is the closest to this reality.

On the other hand, Bishop also challenges the capacity for images to tell stories. Szarkowski tells us that a photograph doesn’t tell stories, but what about several photographs, meaningfully brought together? In Bishop’s collections of poems, there are layers of stories juxtaposed: the real story of her life, the stories she dreamed, the history she made. The image offers the possibility for narratives to happen. All her

images are small bits and pieces of the flow of this life, and they sting the reader in their intensity because of all the ramifications of each of these poem-moments. It is clear in the organization of the poems that those weren't meant to be read alone, self-contained, detached, although one might choose to do so. They connect with each other through space (the places she visited and lived), and time (her life and the memory of it).

Bishop's poetic style is often that of story-telling, which allows the experience of exile and dislocation to be retold. "Crusoe in England" is a lyrical narrative written in the first person. The apparent motive for the story is that Crusoe wants to write to correct the versions of his experiences on the island: "None of the books has ever got it right." In other words, the story he is about to tell is the truth, and the idea that pervades the poem throughout is that the written word is not to be trusted.

A new volcano has erupted,  
the papers say, and last week I was reading  
where some ship saw an island being born:  
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;  
and then a black fleck - basalt, probably -  
rose in the mate's binoculars  
and caught on the horizon like a fly.  
They named it. But my poor island's still  
un-rediscovered, un-renamable.  
None of the books has ever got it right.

[...]

Because I didn't know enough.

Why didn't I know enough of something?

Greek drama or astronomy? The books

I'd read were full of blanks;

the poems - well, I tried

reciting to my iris-beds,

"They flash upon that inward eye,

which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?

One of the first things that I did

when I got back was look it up.

When Crusoe goes back to the past, all he has are faulty textual memories from his life off the island. Therefore, when it comes to telling about his actual life on the island, the language becomes more literal, more mimetic of the actual experience, and the reader gets images of sounds and smells:

The island smelled of goat and guano.

The goats were white, so were the gulls,

and both too tame, or else they thought

I was a goat, too, or a gull.

*Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek,*

*baa...shriek...baa...*I still can't shake  
them from my ears; they're hurting now.

Instead of offering a metaphor for the sounds of the animals, Crusoe uses the onomatopoeias that are the written image of their cries, as the simple, direct image or the attempt at making an image is more accurate. In *The Lyric of Narrative: Exile, Poetry, and Story in Saint-John Perse and Elizabeth Bishop*, Joseph Acquisto notes:

It turns out that one of the most vivid and reliable memories from the island is the one divorced from concepts and their mediation through language. Robinson is haunted, even more than he had been by the poem in which his memory had left holes, by the all-too-literal cries of the animals that mirror his own feelings of despair and remain ringing in his ears for many years to come.

What Acquisto comments on here is the idea that language is inadequate for representing immediate, empirical and emotional experiences. But at the same time, the whole poem *is* a re-writing of Crusoe's story through poetic images.

Bishop is a contemporary poet whose eye was trained by mechanical optics. The reader's eye is too, and so it cannot ignore how her sharp imagery draws attention to the word itself, and its failing, in a way, to see: "There is not way of telling. / The eyes say only either." ("Faustina, or Rock Roses"). Answers are what language cannot



provide, and it is why her poetry is replete with questions and no sense of closure. She dwells in between reading and seeing. Riggs has an interesting theory in regard to Bishop's poem "Florida" that emphasizes how difficult it is for the "reading eye" and the "seeing eye" to intersect:

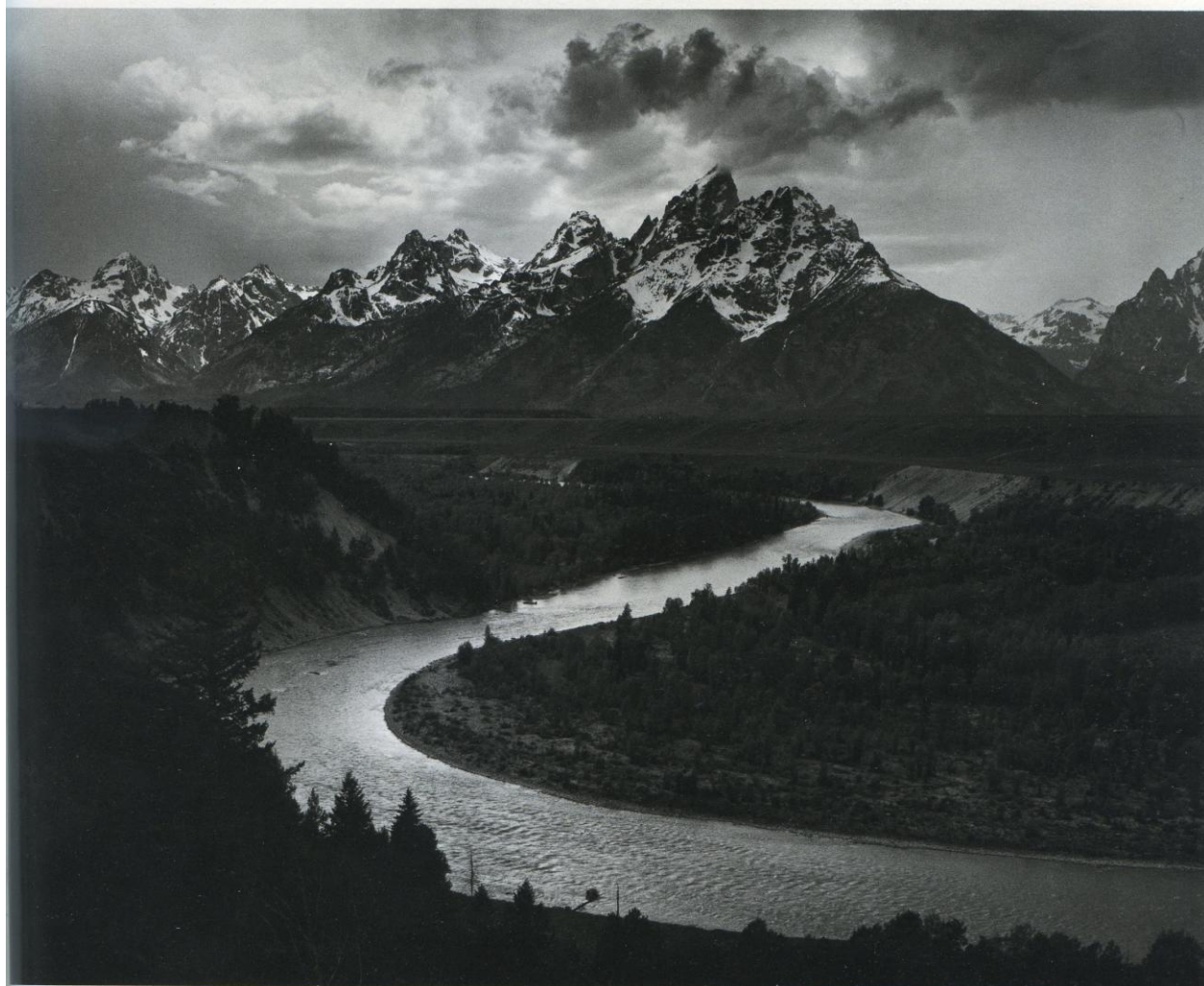
In the classical tradition of enargeia, Bishop creates vivid effects of fireflies, moonlight, whites and blacks - Florida illuminated - and in so doing reaches past the constraints of language to produce a visible scene. But the result is a flawed postcard reproduction: Florida as the "poorest postcard" of itself. (Riggs, 43)

But maybe this bad copy of Florida is the reality that Bishop sees through the optical apparatus of her words. Maybe this poem is about writing the seeing experience and vice versa, taking poetry beyond its linguistic boundaries. Elizabeth Bishop was not a photographer. She used words "as viewing optics," as Riggs aptly notes, but she made poems, not photographs. Instead of focusing on the struggles of language to produce real images, Bishop writes poems that are precisely about challenging this idea. What if we could make images with words? Photographic vocabulary is not just an adequate lexical field and metaphor to talk about her poetry. In turning loss into an image or turning to images to shelter loss, what both photography and Bishop's poetry do is a work of translation. It is like translating a poem into different languages. The translation will be good if it manages to walk the creative path of the original poem and offer a version of it, a version of what it might have been. A lot might be lost in the translation, especially of poetry, unless the writer is able to turn the loss into a different presence. In

a way, Bishop is writing the images the camera might have seen, only the camera is her eye. I like to think of this process as a translation process because it is a positive and challenging one. And in spite of the lucid acknowledgement of failure that pervades Bishop's poems, there were her poems themselves, proving in their refreshing and subdued beauty that she had pushed words to a level of visuality that is quite astonishing.

## Appendix A

Photo 1



*The Tetons and The Snake River.* 1942. Ansel Adams.

## Appendix B

Photo 2

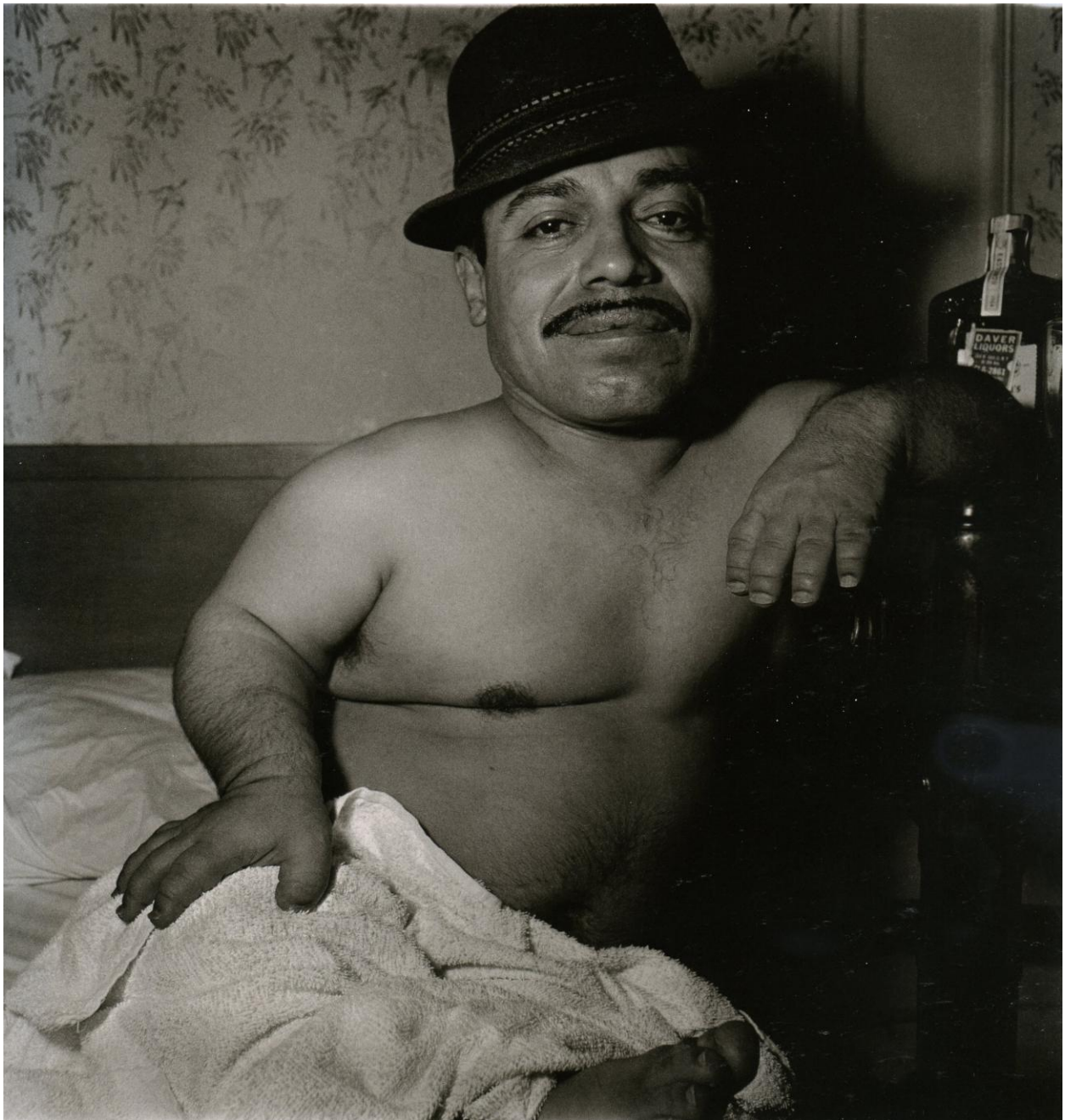


*A Young Brooklyn family Going for a Sunday Outing. 1966. Diane Arbus.*



## Appendix C

Photo 3



*Mexican Dwarf in His Hotel Room in N.Y.C. . 1970. Diane Arbus.*

## Appendix D

Photo 4



*Reflections, Night, New York.* 1896-97. Alfred Stieglitz.



## Appendix E

Photo 5



*Mysterium Der Strasse (Mystery of the Street)*. 1928. Otto Umbehr.

## Appendix F

Photo 6



*Child with a Toy Grenade in Central Park. 1962. Diane Arbus.*



## Appendix G

Photo 7



*East Side Tenement Christmas.* Unknown.

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